THE HONEY BEE

By SAMUEL MERWIN

THE HONEY BEE

"She was conscious of intense solitude"

THE HONEY BEE

A Novel

BY

SAMUEL MERWIN

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ANTHONY THE ABSOLUTE, ETC.

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THE HONEY BEE

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I

HILDA WILSON MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF ADELE RAINEY, OF HARPER AND RAINEY; AND ALSO OF ONE BLINK MORAN, WHOM YOU WOULD HARDLY EXPECT TO BE DIGNIFIED

ONCE in the taxi, she took the little oval mirror from her wrist-bag and studied the grayish, faintly wrinkled half moons under her eyes.

"Color's off, too," she mused. "It's all wrong, Hilda Wilson. You're not there! You certainly are not *there!*"

The taxi whirled into the Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle and darted westward, twisting and skidding with that nonchalant disregard of all living things that contributes in no small measure to the desperate gaiety of Paris streets; but Miss Wilson gave not a thought to the spectacle. The thousands of masculine pedestrians, with their sedulously kept beards, their flapping trousers, and (here and there) their monocles, moved slowly along the sidewalks under the bare trees and studied the thousands of women with the casual boldness of ancient habit; but for Miss Wilson they did not exist. The café waiters, blue and cold in their indoor garments and white aprons, hovered among the outdoor ta-

bles, keeping close to the charcoal braziers and the patches of winter sunlight; the cinemas blazed their white fronts; the curb kiosks flared their provocative jumble of advertisements; a battalion of cuirassiers rode by, helmet plumes waving and breastplates glinting; a motor-bus collided with the tricycle of an épicerie boy, and blocked all traffic for nearly a minute: Miss Wilson was aware only of that tired face.

She locked her fingers tightly in her lap. Then, suddenly aware that her nerves were absurdly tense, she unclasped her hands and let them drop by her sides.

"To think," she said aloud, in the crisp slang of the store that was always amusing and usually expressive, "that that harmless old rubber stamp could"—she hesitated, then came down, with a self-conscious little grimace, on the phrase—"could get my goat like that!"

During eight consecutive winters and eight consecutive summers Hilda Wilson had spent a fortnight to three weeks at Paris, buying model gowns, wraps, suits and blouses. Naturally her business headquarters had always been with Armandeville et Cie., in the Rue d'Hauteville, for these gentlemen were the traditional Paris commissionnaires for the Hartman store. Naturally, too, old M. Armandeville himself, during these four to six weeks of eight consecutive years had tried elaborately and, at times, rather laboriously to introduce a personal note into their business relationship. Beyond an instinctive repugnance to the awkward fact that men will persist in making themselves—well, difficult, at times, she had never before given him more than a passing thought. Indeed she had considered him, because of his Gallic elaborateness, rather easier to forestall than the more reticent, subtler men of America.

But now . . . ! She had certainly upset things.

And she was running away. After what she had said it was really impossible to stay on in that office. For the rest of the afternoon, anyway.

A picture of the old gentleman's face came to her mind's eye—sitting there, so frankly bewildered, so ingenuously grieved, while she stood over him, flushed and angry, reminding him of his family as well as of the advantage he was taking of herself. She might quite as well have talked the ethical system of the Choctaws. She wondered, with an oddly cold detachment of mind, what had become of her poise and her humor. Her vigor was still evident. No doubt about that. But she had lost control of it at last, after all the annoying little warnings of the last year or so that just this thing might some day happen. This was the day, it appeared.

The taxi crossed the Place de l'Opèra and turned to the right along the wide Rue Auber. At the next corner it swung in to the curb before the offices of the American Express Company—that familiar "11 Rue Scribe" through which, during a long generation, have drifted so many thousands of wandering Americans.

She went directly up the stairs to the big mail room; called for her letters at the "M to Z" window; then dropped into the nearest unoccupied chair. She simply did not see, with any inner eye, the half a hundred other persons scattered about at the two-sided writing tables and in the easy chairs by the windows; indeed she was only dimly conscious of the man opposite when she had seated herself.

Miss Wilson drew off her gloves, and went at her letters.

One, addressed in her mother's hand and with the familiar Indiana postmark, she put in her bag for later attention. Another, also addressed in longhand, she pursed her lips over; then laid it aside. The business letters claimed her

attention first. She ran through the little heap of envelopes with quick eyes and nimble fingers.

Then she paused, frowned slightly, and for a moment held her hand against the back of her head; then brought it down to her chest, pressed it there, and drew a long breath. She had expended a good deal of emotional energy in that foolish little scene with M. Armandeville. She realized this now. And she knew that it was energy wasted.

Her eyes rested on the man across the table. He looked up, too. He had a square strong face, with heavy bunches of muscle on each jaw and rather high cheek-bones. His brown hair came down over his forehead in a rebellious thatch. There was a slight twist in his nose, as if it had been broken. The eyes were large, and of a steady blue, unusually attractive eyes; but one eyelid had been cut at some time, precisely in the middle, and stitched so that it was now drawn up in a permanent and faintly grotesque suggestion of a Gothic arch. A curious face and head; but solid and strong. Made you wonder a little what he could be. He was young, certainly not much over thirty, if that. His blue serge suit had been made by a good tailor—an English tailor, she thought. Over a chair beside him lay a long overcoat of broadcloth heavily lined with sable.

The top letter was from Joe Hemstead, typed under the familiar head of the Hartman store (of recent years she had made a point of having her personal mail sent here and not to M. Armandeville's office). She read this first; then sat motionless considering it, pursing her lips as she had over the unopened envelope that lay at her elbow, and slightly tapping the big blotter.

A young woman came up and whispered to the odd-looking man. He promptly gave her his seat and went away, getting into his overcoat as he passed out the door.

The girl dropped a muff and stole of imitation ermine on the chair and began a letter, writing hurriedly.

Miss Wilson looked at the furs. A smile flickered about the corners of her mouth and brightened her eyes as she indulged in a mental "Meaow!" Then her face sobered. She reached for her pen and wrote as follows, in a strong slanting hand:

"DEAR MR. HEMSTEAD: Your letter of the seventh has just come. I fully appreciate the consideration in your suggestion, but I *do* feel some chagrin at the thought that others have noted my condition. It is only within the last few weeks that I've fully realized it myself. I seem to be getting about three hours' sleep a night. And my head has taken to aching, in the back. I lost my temper to-day. Don't know when I've done such a thing. I see now that I should have taken that solid month off last summer, when you wanted me to.

"But I really don't feel that I can take it now. One reason is—I see I've got to face this—that when I *do* stop it may take more than a month to make me fit again. Another is that May Isbell, while she is taking hold better every day, isn't quite ready yet to carry responsibility. I don't dare load it on her now—not with the spring business just ready to hit us.

"So she and I will sail for home on the 25th or 26th. I will cable date and steamer some days before this reaches you. For the present she is down at Nice and Monte Carlo studying the fashions. I am impressing on her the importance of keeping close to the real centers. She will come up via Calais and meet me at London. We are not making Berlin this trip. I sent you a letter last night reporting on business matters.

"The week on the ocean will tone me up well enough for the present. And I promise you to let go the minute the spring business begins to slacken.

"And now regarding Stanley Aitcheson. I'm sorry you had to know about it. But of course, if he broke out like

that to Mr. Martin, it had to come up to you. You ask if he has made me any trouble. Well—no. Not what you would call trouble. I'll tell you just what I think it is. He's really a bit of genius. You know he can say in six words what Sumner and Deal's man needs sixty for. We've never had an advertising man who was so quick to catch the talking points of the merchandise, especially with these feminine things, or who could so consistently write the stuff that pulls the crowd. I don't know but what he is entitled to a little burst of 'temperament' now and then. He is young and imaginative, and this infatuation seems to have mixed him all up for the time.

"I hope you won't think it necessary to do anything about it. Give him a little time. In the meanwhile, I think I can handle it.

"Do you mind my sending this to your club address instead of the office? It *is* rather personal

"Sincerely,

"Hilda Wilson."

She read this letter over twice, very slowly; and knit her brows. There were two or three things about it that felt distinctly wrong; her judgment, usually automatic in all personal as in business relationships, was unmistakably shaky to-day.

She knew Joe Hemstead pretty well; and she knew he would not like the idea of her coming back and trying to work after her own admission that she did not feel equal to it. No, he wouldn't like that. He would begin from that moment to doubt if she was, after all, big enough for her job. That was just the point with Joe Hemstead. His confidence in you was a stimulus day in and day out; but you had to go right on earning that confidence, all the time.

Then there was this disturbing affair of Stanley Aitch-

eson. She was inclined to think she was saying too much about him. Besides, she was taking a position in the matter before considering all the facts—there lay Stanley's letter at her elbow, unopened. She didn't want to open it.

She had thought to shake off her curiously unsettling mood by dashing away from M. Armandeville's office into the open air. But now that mood was strengthening its grip on her. It was becoming a real depression, a sinking feeling—as if the bottom had all at once dropped out of life. The absurdity of this sensation was obvious. It was the particular sort of weakness with which she had no patience. She set her will against it; but it grew, a creeping paralysis of the spirit. She began to realize that she definitely dreaded going back and plunging into the spring rush. You had to drive so. It took so much out of you.

"But then," she mused, "we have to do a good many things in this life that we don't want to do."

After which she rested her cheek on her hand and gazed down, very soberly, at the little pile of letters. It is not so easy to talk down one's own misgivings.

Then she realized that some one was speaking to her—the girl across the table.

"I beg pardon," said Miss Wilson.

The girl's voice faltered shyly as she repeated—

"How do you spell pasteurized?"

Miss Wilson started to reply, hesitated, and laughed a little. "If you hadn't asked me so quickly—it's—oh, yes, of course." And she spelled it out.

The girl wrote it down; then looked up again. "I never was any good at spelling," she ventured. "But I could always get dates—in history, you know. And I was always over ninety in algebra and deportment."

"It is a special gift, I think," replied Miss Wilson.

"There are a good many highly educated people who can't spell."

"Oh, is that so!" replied the girl, appearing greatly relieved. Then, as if fearing that she had spoken too loud, she bit her lip and glanced timidly about at the near-by tables.

For a little time after that Miss Wilson watched her as she went on with her letter. Ordinarily girls bored Miss Wilson. There were seventeen hundred of them in the store, and they were always getting either themselves or you into trouble. Indeed one of her chief annoyances was that Mr. Martin, whose task it was to employ the help, was too easy with them. And Joe Hemstead backed him up in it. Take the case of Annie Haggerty, for instance. A sensible woman could see in a moment that Annie was simply bad. . . . But any idle speculation was a relief as Miss Wilson felt this afternoon. And this girl across the table was curiously difficult to place.

She was very young—hardly more than nineteen or twenty—and slim, with a rather small head nicely poised on a long neck; a firm, almost muscular neck, when you looked closely. She had a wide friendly mouth, that showed a tendency to droop at the corners, an unobtrusive chin, and large green-brown eyes. "Cow eyes," thought Miss Wilson, "but they're honest enough. What on earth is she doing in Paris! Looks like Brooklyn. Or Bridgeport."

Finding no answer to her question, she let her eyes rove over the girl's costume. This was every whit as puzzling as the face. The hat was small, with a single high feather set at not quite the right angle. "Trimmed it herself," thought Miss Wilson, "after a look around on the boulevards." The very plain black suit had probably been picked

up in London. The "waist" was American. "Two-nineteen on Fourteenth Street," Miss Wilson decided.

There was not a single indication that anybody had ever spent a cent on the girl. But if that was the case, how did she ever get to Paris at all? She couldn't conceivably be a tourist. And she didn't have the married look. Though you can't always tell. Still—yes, that was the only conceivable explanation.

"What a city Paris is!" she mused, at last in a measure drawn out of her moody introspection. "Every sort of person drifts in here. Anything can happen here. Anything does happen, all the time."

She fell to resenting the fact that she had never really seen Paris—only a few of the hotels, certain of the restaurants on the Right Bank, the Folie Bergères once with a crowd from Armandeville's, and always the Opèra Comique in winter and Longchamp in summer for the fashions, the familiar dressmaking establishments, that was about all. She had never been in the famous old *Quartier Latin*. Ed Johnson, the glove buyer, had talked enthusiastically, one lonely evening at Vienna, of Lavenue's and its violinist, of the merry irresponsible life at the Café d'Harcourt. She knew well enough that the men buyers looked around a bit. They didn't let their work cut into their evenings—not to any uncomfortable extent. But then, they were men. They took the world as it came, the world that was at every point adapted to their needs, their qualities, their desires. They did not have that exceedingly delicate structure, reputation, to look after—not so that you'd notice it. They were judged, not by their slips, but by their abilities and achievements.

"No," she reflected, "men aren't in a net all their life with an enemy at every opening if they try to escape." At

this point her thoughts became vaguer, more in the nature of inarticulate feelings. She was conscious of intense solitude; of the woman's need, if she has chosen work, to work harder and harder and harder, to drive herself mercilessly, to build up an artificial life of routine and habit that shall finally overlay the silent deep stirrings and yearnings that come. . . .

Then, with the thought, "I'm getting absolutely morbid!" she made an effort to bring her thoughts back to the bright busy surface of life, where a woman must dwell if she is to dwell alone.

The girl looked up, and met her eyes.

"Have you been here long?" asked Miss Wilson.

"Two months in Paris. Fourteen months altogether on this side. I'll be glad to get back." The corners of the girl's mouth drooped as the easy smile died out.

"That *is* a long while to be away."

The man with the Gothic eyelid appeared in the doorway. He was coming toward the table until he observed that the girl and the woman were talking. He stopped short, then, took off his overcoat, and walked back to the newspaper table at the farther end of the room. Miss Wilson watched him. He was fairly tall—five feet ten or eleven, she thought—with noticeably good shoulders. And he moved with almost feminine grace.

She decided to take a chance.

"Your husband just came back," she observed casually.

"My what!" exclaimed the girl blankly. Then, after a glance over her shoulder, she added—"He isn't my husband. I'm not married. That's Blink Moran."

"Blink Moran!" repeated Miss Wilson, unable to suppress a smile.

"Don't you know who he is?"

Miss Wilson didn't know.

"Why, the middleweight boxer. He's American, too."

"Not Irish?" Miss Wilson was still smiling.

"Oh, that's only the name he took when he started fighting. He's really a Dutchman, from Holland, Michigan. Used to keep bees. His family name's awful funny—Klopfshorn, or Stoomboot, or something. It wouldn't do, you know, on the stage or in the ring."

"No," agreed Miss Wilson, conscious of a quickened if rather startled interest in the man, "I suppose it wouldn't."

"He's a nice fellow," the girl chattered on. "Takes wonderful care of himself—doesn't drink or smoke. And he doesn't like women very well. You see, he has lived here three or four years. When he first came over he fell in love with a French girl and she got all his money away from him that he'd saved—nearly eighteen thousand francs. Then she ran off to South America with a fellow—Buenos Aires. I'd like to go there." She sighed. "He told Will Harper the whole story. Will Harper's my partner. He fights all over Europe now—in Germany and Spain and Austria and Egypt and—and Tunis and Algiers. Makes a good deal of money, I think. He was to have a match with Carpentier, but Carpentier's afraid of him."

This was certainly a bit out of the common. Miss Wilson felt the touch of momentary exhilaration that busy persons of routine habit are likely to feel when an occasional glimpse is vouchsafed them of that irresponsible region known as "Bohemia." She carried the conversation on for a little time, but without success in arriving at an explanation of the girl.

"She looks like something or other"—so ran Miss Wilson's thoughts—"as if she could do some one thing well. She's straight, or at least honest—couldn't tell much of a

lie. She doesn't want anything from me, just feels friendly. But she is certainly in with a queer crowd. Prize-fighters! . . . Maybe I'll have something to tell Ed Johnson yet."

While she was studying the girl, the cow eyes came up again.

"You spoke of your partner," said Miss Wilson. "Are you a business woman?"

The girl shook her head.

"I'm one myself," Miss Wilson continued, by way of reassuring her. "I have a department in a New York store."

The girl did not seem much impressed with this, though she smiled pleasantly. "No," she said, "I don't know anything about business. Be better off if I did. I'm a dancer."

"Oh, a dancer!"

"Yes—one of the four Texas Twisters. We're in the review at the Parnasse Music Hall, my partner and I. Probably you've seen us in New York—Harper and Rainey, we are. I'm Adele Rainey."

Miss Wilson shook her head.

The girl was frankly surprised, and a thought disappointed.

"You've heard of us, though?"

Again Miss Wilson, though swiftly ransacking her memory, had to give a negative response.

"That so? I just thought probably you had. It takes a long time to get your personality across. Will's all the time saying that." She sighed. But in a moment she was chattering on. "You know they're wild over American dances in Paris. And rag songs. At the Parnasse they have to have twenty English chorus girls because so many

of our American songs can't be translated. Like *Hitchy Koo,* I mean, and *Some Boy,* and *Snooky Ookums.* Then we go on every afternoon at the tango tea. Funny—they call it *'thé'.*"

"Tay?" repeated Miss Wilson, amused.

"No, not that. 'Teh', more like. It's pretty near time for me to be getting around there." She consulted the nickel watch that was bound to her wrist with a black strap. "In half an hour. Wouldn't you like to come? It's nice there in the afternoon."

Miss Wilson found herself somewhat taken aback. Things were moving rapidly. The girl seemed to have no reserve at all—nothing of that instinctive caution, that instant readiness to mask one's feelings and pit one's wits against a hostile mind that is dominant in all competitive business. After all, it was distinctly refreshing. Though how on earth so ingenuous a child, knocking about in the crazy underworld of stageland, could last a year without being utterly smashed was a question. Come to think of it, they did get smashed, all the time. Though it occurred to her that a dancer, if she really knew the job, would stand a much better chance than a mere untrained chorus girl. It was the people without training that went to pieces, people without a real grip on something. It was that way at the store.

"I don't know whether I can," she replied. "I have letters to write, and after that I ought to go back to the hotel and lie down. But thank you for asking me."

The girl's face sobered. "I can't really take you in," she explained painstakingly. "Not in the stage door. They wouldn't let you through. You'd have to buy a ticket and come in the front. But it's only two francs—and two

more for the tea, of course. And you could come back and sit with us in the artists' corner."

"Well," replied Miss Wilson, "maybe I will." She looked down at the letters; then, with compressed lips, picked up the one she had laid aside and turned it slowly over and over in her hands.

It was a rule of her life never to slight the work of the day. She prided herself on a sort of healthy contempt for mental philandering. Yet she felt distinctly tempted to let everything slide and go to this absurd *"thé* tango" with her rather interesting new acquaintance. The letter in her hands that she found such difficulty in opening symbolized the pressure that was driving her to let go in just that way.

"I think I'll do it," she thought. "Just relax for once, before I get too old and set to relax at all. It's exactly what Joe Hemstead has been talking, and Ed, and Martin. They'll be thinking next that I've lost my resiliency, and that's just one more way of saying I can't handle my job. They do these things all the time. They go to ball games all summer, while I'm sticking close at the store. Every fall they put on their old clothes and go hunting off in the woods and talk rough and let their beards grow. And it doesn't hurt their work. Not a bit. They keep efficient, and they keep human. Why, even when Ed gets drunk the men all look after him and ease things off for him. There's something men have among themselves—and I don't believe I shall ever know what it is."

Then, with a deliberate exercise of will power, she centered her attention on the unopened letter in her hands.

It was a long letter, written in impassioned language that seemed altogether unreal to Miss Wilson as she read hastily through it. It was signed, "Stanley A."

"Tell me this," ran the conclusion. "If you did not care for me, why did you permit me to become so fond of you? As it is now, the thing is beyond my strength. I'm half crazy with it. It wakes me at night. It depresses me, and rouses moods that I can't control. It certainly isn't my fault. Perhaps it isn't yours, either. But this is a real love. You take it lightly. You ignore me. You refuse to answer my letters. You try to make me out a mere boy. You are hard, hard, hard. You have let business deaden your feelings. For you must have had a heart once, or I couldn't have felt the quality in you that made me love you."

And so on and on. Miss Wilson was flushing; but behind this emotional mask her mind was cold. What an amazing mixture of ardor and reproach! What on earth *could* she say or do! She had never dreamed of this storm until the moment it broke, a few months back. She knew his age—he was five years younger than she. And she liked him. But his outbursts left her speechless.

"I can't go on like this." Thus the concluding sentences. "I have told Mr. Martin I shall leave before you return. I can't go on. Whatever becomes of me, remember I love you and you alone—Oh, these poor old phrases! They've been said and written a million million times in this ugly, bitter old world! A million million times have men poured out these phrases to women who have laughed or kept silent. I shall leave this part of the world. It won't do for me to be near you—I should simply break out again. And you, with your coldness, would hurt me more than I could bear. Only once more I shall see you. I don't know where or when, but I shall see you once. After that it will be good-by. I don't know what will become of me then. But I must give you one more chance to show at least a human feeling toward me."

She went back and read the letter all through again,

slowly. It irritated her. For it stirred memories of the one real love story in her life—memories she had been trying, during nearly eight years, to supplant with hard work and new interests.

Stanley's outbreaks had roused her before, on a number of occasions. That was what irritated her—his power to stir her feelings. That was what irritated her in the approaches of old M. Armandeville and the many others. For they made her think about love. And for years she had told herself that she did not wish to think about love.

Certainly this new letter of Stanley's had stirred her deeply. Confused feelings were rushing up from the remote corners of memory, recollections of the one great emotional storm that had swept over her and that had left behind it yearnings and a strain of bitterness. The man, in her case, had been her first employer, Harris Doreyn, of Chicago. He was married. Their attachment had grown, little by little, through several years of a close working companionship. It had very nearly swept both off their feet. Then, to save herself, she had left him; and he had been man enough to let her go.

She had for a time succeeded, especially during the years of her first success at New York, in driving these poignant, bewildering memories out of mind. But lately, since the enthusiasm of her middle twenties had passed and her nerves had begun to show the effects of those driving years, they had with increasing frequency slipped back among her conscious thoughts. More than a year earlier she had become aware, through a bantering remark of Ed Johnson's, that she had fallen into the habit of quoting bits of the philosophy of Harris Doreyn. Since then she had on more than one occasion caught herself at this, and had made up her mind to be more careful about it. Even

after the years, it was best that she should not appear to have much to say about that man.

Her irritation deepened. She did not like to hurt this bewildered boy; but above all she resented being hurt herself.

She seized a pen, and with a hand that trembled wrote right across the first page of his letter—

"You have no right to say these things. Please do not do so again, as I can not discuss them with you. You are making it impossible for me to treat you with even ordinary courtesy. If you are not a poor coward you will stay at your desk and make good. And please try to understand once and for all that I do not care for you in this way and never shall. This is final. I do not wish to be forced to say it again."

The girl across the table looked up now, and spoke.

"Do you think you'd like to come?"

Miss Wilson knit her brows; and said, "Let me think a moment."

She reread what she had just written.

Then she deliberately tore it into small bits, and the rest of his letter with it, and dropped it all into the waste basket. There was downright perplexity on her face. Writing a letter in a fit of anger—she certainly knew better than that. And calling him a "poor coward"—he *would* have a case against her, and in the intensity of his confusion would press it. She simply couldn't write him at all, and she wouldn't try.

Adele Rainey turned and beckoned to her friend the middleweight. He promptly put down his newspaper and came walking swiftly and lightly toward them, the whole length of the big room. It occurred to Miss Wilson, as

she covertly watched him, that he had the grace of a tiger, and the strength.

Adele looked up at him with some anxiety on her ingenuous face. "I suppose everything was all right?" she said. "Or else you would have come and told me."

Miss Wilson listened for his reply. She was prepared for rough and ungrammatical speech. Probably he would say "youse" and "t'inks," and that curiously indiscriminate substitute for the second personal pronoun, "Bo." Little Jimmy Hartigan, who did her errands at the store, was consumed with admiration for just such rough characters as this Blink person; and she had labored much, at times, to elevate his standard of English speech.

But the Blink person replied, very simply and directly—

"Yes—all right. It cried some, and I held it while Blondie went to the English drug store for some paregoric. Then it went to sleep again."

"Oh," exclaimed the girl, "was Blondie there? Where was Millicent?"

"Monocle John came for her with a taxi to substitute for Juliette at the Parnasse."

The girl looked very thoughtful. "I'd rather he'd taken Blondie," she mused. "Millicent's got more sense. I've been writing to Juliette. Have they heard anything from her?"

"Not that I know of." He consulted his watch. "It's about time to be starting."

"Yes, I know," she replied, sealing her letter and reaching for the imitation ermine stole. Then she hesitated and sent an inquiring glance across the table.

Miss Wilson came at that instant to a decision.

"Be with you in a minute," she said.

She tore up the letter to Joe Hemstead and sent the

small, fluttering pieces to nestle among the remains of the Aitcheson letter in the waste basket. Her gray-blue eyes flashed as she took a cable blank from the rack, and wrote—

"Hemstead Hartmanshop New York. Taking vacation now sending Isbell back letter follows. Wilson."

"I can send it from the branch post-office in the Rue Gluck-Meyerbeer," she thought, "on our way. And I'll wire May to-night when I've had time to think it over."

Blink Moran stood opposite her now. Evidently introductions were not essential in this circle; for Adele Rainey merely said, "The lady's coming with us, Blink." And Blink inclined his head, gravely.

At the curb he called a taxi. He stepped out at the post-office to send the cablegram for Miss Wilson; and at her request told her exactly how much it came to. He was straightforward, but very reserved. Which fact rather amused Miss Wilson. A grave reticence, not without its element of quiet courtesy, was hardly the quality she would have looked for in a prize-fighter.

Well, here she was—crowded into a taxi with this well-dressed pugilist and a badly dressed dancing girl with attractively honest eyes. She felt reasonably certain that the confusion of purpose within her and the distinct touch of exhilaration were not apparent. Her face and manner were too well schooled for that.

She wondered what next.

II

SHE GOES TO A NOVEL ENTERTAINMENT; WEARING, HOWEVER, THE WRONG CLOTHES

MISS WILSON and Blink Moran sat far back in the "artists' corner" of the Parnasse tea room, at the extreme end of the low platform that enabled the patrons of the rear rows of tables to see the dancing over the heads of those seated on the floor level. He answered her questions quietly but fully enough. Indeed, familiar as the scene was to him, he seemed to take a sober sort of enjoyment in the bright gaiety of it.

The couple now dancing the Maxixe in the cleared space between the tables were Etheridge and Gay, of the Twisters troupe. A married couple by the way; though very young. She had lost her baby, in London, only three months back. Also on the floor were Millicent, a pretty girl, of the English chorus, and the person known as "Monocle John," a pasty-faced French youth with sleepy eyes, one of which was partially obscured by a monocle. The extraordinarily blond waiter, who met Moran's excellent French at every point with a surprising command of English, used to work at the Plaza and the Knickerbocker in New York. And the boxer smiled a little, adding—"We always do this. I talk French to him. And he won't talk anything but English to me."

"You speak French very well, don't you?" said Miss

Wilson, with a slight touch of chagrin that this rough person should outmatch her in accomplishments. But he turned the little compliment aside with a simple "Oh, you pick it up."

It became gradually evident—as the clock over the entrance door struck one quarter-hour after another, as the hundreds of tables filled with guests of every imaginable nationality, as the violin and mandolin orchestras alternately played the latest dance music, dreamy and gay, as graceful tangoists gave way to the riotous "Texas Twisters" in cowboy costume and then again took the floor—that this same Mr. Moran was something of a celebrity. Every one in the corner of this great room unmistakably knew who he was. The waiters, the dancers, the members of the orchestra regarded him with respect that was not without its touch of awe. She saw two different groups of American men, at near-by tables, looking over into the corner and whispering about him.

The fact interested her because it explained his manner. Being a celebrity, he was simply acting as a celebrity is forced to act by the attitude of the world about him. It explained his reticence and his courtesy. And it was not surprising, when you stopped to think of it. She knew that the boxer is greatly respected in Paris, that he may easily have something near a social standing. Why, Carpentier, the heavyweight champion, was the idol of Paris, and was reported, even in the outer circles which her own life occasionally touched, to be a young man of considerable charm.

A little later Moran called her attention to these same Americans. They were all drinking highballs, and were rapidly approaching the state in which mellow good cheer gives way to a primitive enjoyment of noise as such.

"Queer how Americans act over here," he observed, studying the two groups reflectively. "They go crazy."

"Not all Americans."

"Most all. The men, I mean, when they aren't with their families. You know it isn't the French that go to pieces in Paris, anyway. It's our folks, and the English and Germans, and sometimes the South Americans. These Parisians keep their heads, and put their boys in school, and shut up their daughters where we won't see them, and then they take our money. They don't mind."

"I never thought of that," mused Miss Wilson. "It always seemed a pretty lively sort of place to me. Though I've always been too busy to look around much."

"Oh, it's lively enough. But it wouldn't be without us foreigners. Just look around once in any other French city and you'll see what I mean. An American or Canadian may be all right at home, and keep fairly straight in London, but the minute he hits Paris, everything's off. He explodes with a big bang. His mind's all prepared for it, you see. That's the way he thinks of Paris. Take those fellows over there, now. Pretty soon they'll begin yelling. Then they'll be trying to make some of these tourist ladies dance with them. And then they'll get thrown out. It happens most every day."

"I have always supposed," observed Miss Wilson, "that we are more moral than the French."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"But certainly, as a people, we behave better."

"Better—and worse," said he. "We pull a longer face. And we're always telling ourselves how good we are and how wicked the French are. Oh, we don't hate ourselves! Not so much. But when we blow, we blow for keeps. And Mr. Frenchman just looks at us, and wonders what's got

into us, and goes on the way he was before—not so good and not so bad. I was talking about this just the other day with an English newspaper man. He says the Frenchman isn't worse than us, or better. It's only that his safety valve is set lower."

Miss Wilson chuckled softly. He was distinctly a bit of a philosopher, her prize-fighter. She would have liked to carry the conversation further, had not a sudden diversion claimed the attention of both.

A slim pretty girl, with a weakly pleasant face and extremely blonde hair made her way through the crowded tables and joined the group of "artists" in the corner. She spoke to Adele Rainey.

"The doctor was in, Adele, and he says it's colic when it rolls its eyes and smiles that funny way."

Adele looked alarmed. "Colic!" she exclaimed. "But say, Blondie, you didn't leave it alone, did you?"

"No, two of the girls came in. He gave me a list of things to get at the drug store to fix the food with. The milk's too strong. Somebody give me some money."

"Here," said Moran, handing her a gold louis.

She took the coin, and, admonished by Adele to lose no time on her errand, went back through the crowd and out the main doorway.

Shortly after this Adele brought her dancing partner to the table.

"This is the lady that came with us, Will," she said.

Harper bowed. He was a mere youth of twenty or twenty-one with a pale, almost haggard face. He smiled a good deal, and talked eagerly, as if anxious to make a pleasant impression. Miss Wilson had observed that his fingers were stained with nicotine, and that every moment that he was not actually out on the dancing floor he was

inhaling cigarettes. She had also noted the fact that after a very few moments of his acrobatic dancing he appeared exhausted and had some difficulty in getting his breath.

"Are you interested in this side of Paris life?" he asked, so palpably talking up to her that she had to suppress a smile.

She admitted that she was.

"Funny how you meet all sorts o' people here," he ran on. "Take our troupe, for instance. Miss Rainey's from Buffalo. I'm from Kansas City. You wouldn't expect to find a Kansas City boy working here on the boulevards—now would you!"

Suddenly his face clouded, as with the recurrence of a half-forgotten anxiety. "Say, I'm sort o' sorry you came to-day. I'm trying out a new tune for this next dance, and there's no telling how it'll go. They may not like it at all, you know. I been using *Under the Car for Yours.* It's a good tune. You know how it goes."

To make sure, he hummed it huskily, oblivious to the fact that the mandolins were at the moment filling the air with a quite different melody. Plainly, the simplest thing was to nod knowingly; which Miss Wilson accordingly did.

"I'm trying out *Tingle, Tingle* to-day. It's a good tune, you know. But you never can tell how they'll go with the crowd. I've got a trunk full of songs up-stairs, though, and I'll try 'em out till I get the right one. You come around to-morrow, and if this thing doesn't work out, I'll go back to *Under the Car for Yours.* That's safe, anyway. This way, I'm afraid you won't get much idea of my dancing."

Fortunately his call came then. Miss Wilson glanced at Moran to see how he took this curiously trivial boy. But

Moran evidently was taking him in the same way that he appeared to take everything else—as a matter of course. It amused her further to observe that Adele played quite as important a part in the dance as the boy's egotistical self. Indeed, Adele seemed really to become herself on the dancing floor. She was light and pleasing as a fairy. She even took on a degree of distinction.

In a short time they were back; Harper, by lighting a cigarette with great nonchalance, endeavoring to conceal the fact that for the moment he simply could not recover his breath. A moment more and he was talking again, rapidly and at random. He asked her advice regarding the wisdom of accepting a tentative offer to go to Budapest for the spring months. He confided to her that he and Adele didn't get on with Etheridge and Gay. "We're going to break up, anyway, after this engagement," he whispered, close to her ear. "Jimmy takes my steps as fast as I can invent 'em. He gets by now because he's got me to steal from—but you watch him after he's been going it alone for a month or two. He won't have a thing. Why, right now he can't even do a wing. Think of it! Nothing but this Texas Twist step and some straight clogging. And he got the twist from me. Harry Behman—he was our manager before—he told me just last week that a man who can dance like I can oughtn't to be tied up with a fellow like Jimmy Etheridge. And Harry knows my work, you see."

At this point Adele hurried him off to change his costume.

When he returned, it was with a fresh idea. "Say," he observed, leaning an elbow on the table, "if you enjoy seeing this side of Paris life, why don't you make Blink here take you to a fight? It's the great thing here now, you

know, next to dancing. All Paris is crazy about boxing. They call it *La Boxe*. Funny, isn't it!"

This curious suggestion came to Miss Wilson with quite unexpected force. It *was* a curious suggestion—yet why not! Ed Johnson would do it in a minute. So would Joe Hemstead himself, for that matter, if it happened to catch his interest. She bit her lip; and the gray-blue eyes lighted.

Moran was looking down at his empty teacup, moving the grounds about with his spoon. As nearly as she could make out, he was struggling with the courteous impulse to accept the situation young Harper had thrust upon him. Perhaps he didn't quite know what to make of the idea of taking a lady to a fight.

She watched him, suppressing a smile. She saw the bunches of muscle on his jaws move and set. She felt the not unmischievous desire to pin him down to it and go straight through with the little adventure, now that she had let herself go so far along the way. It would be interesting to see how he would handle the situation. Then her thoughts fluttered. She was certainly being swept along at a great rate. And it did sound rather alarming.

He raised his eyes, and met hers frankly. The Gothic eyebrow seemed grotesquely conspicuous; yet the eyes were attractively cool and steady, and the face was firm. The color arose unexpectedly in her cheeks; and again she bit her lip.

"There's one to-night, if you'd care to see it," he said—"at Luna Park, out by the Porte Maillot."

It was her chance. Fourteen driving business years had taught her that a chance will not keep. And so, with the sudden queer sensation of one who is casting off all moor-

ings and swinging out on a very long trail indeed, she slowly nodded.

"Why, thank you," she replied calmly. "I'd like very much to go."

"All right. It's Sam Langford and a big Englishman. The preliminaries are nearly all amateur—the army championships—not very interesting. We don't want to get there before ten o'clock. If you'll tell me where to call for you—"

Miss Wilson wrote the name of her hotel on a card, and gave it to him.

"I'll be ready for you any time after half past nine, but oh, as to clothes. The only woman I ever knew that went to a fight wore men's things. She was a newspaper girl." She hesitated, in momentary embarrassment.

He shook his head, saying merely, "That won't be necessary."

She could have asked innumerable questions—as to the exact degree of brutality she must steel herself to endure with, at least, outward composure; as to this Langford and his opponent, who they might be and where they might have come from; something more in detail regarding the proper costume—but she promptly decided to ask none of them, just to go ahead and accept whatever might come. That was her method in business; therefore why not follow it in this plunge into a new region of experience, this region which was habitually roamed over with the most casual freedom in the world by virtually every man of her acquaintance, but regarding which most of the women she knew were quite ignorant and only a little curious.

When she rose to go, it was a relief to find that he made no offer to escort her; merely bowed, and stood by his

chair while she said good-by to Harper and Rainey. These young persons now felt that they had known her well for a very long time indeed, and were properly cordial in urging her to return on the morrow.

It was with a sense of almost complete unreality that she threaded her way among the tables, walked down the long passage to the boulevard entrance, and turned toward the Place de l'Opèra.

She walked briskly. She always walked briskly. The afternoon was over now, and the early winter darkness had settled over the city. The broad sidewalk was thronged. The roadway was dense with moving vehicles. The shops were all lighted, and the street lamps. Newsboys and fakers shouted their wares. Everywhere, all about her, was the stir and pulse of intense life. She responded to the stimulus of it, but still with that odd sense of unreality. It was an eight-year-old spectacle to her; but as a personal experience it was wholly new. She had seen it often enough; she had never before been a part of it. To-day Paris had caught her up. In a harmless but sufficiently exciting way she purposed whirling along with it, riding with the tide, for the time letting her life take its own course, just as Paris does.

No more drive for a while—only freedom! She drew in a quick deep breath at the thought. Of course she would have to see a little more of M. Armandeville and his staff, enough to make certain that all her purchases except the three dozen stock gowns from Caillaut's and the cloaks from Henri's should really be shipped before the first, and these latter not later than March twentieth. And she must lay out May Isbell's work pretty carefully. She would have May come back to Paris instead of going through by the Mediterranean-Calais route to London, keep her about for

a day or two, and then send her along. The business letters that were now in her wrist-bag she would answer this evening—before going out. There would be more enjoyment in the evening if she knew that these few nagging little matters were definitely out of her mind. It was like keeping your desk clean at the office; you slept better for it. . . . Also she must reply to her mother's letter. She would have to think out some way of explaining her sudden decision to linger abroad that would forestall any worry on her mother's part. But that should not be difficult.

She turned to the right at the Rue de la Paix, and walked through to the Rue de Rivoli, turning in at one of the big cosmopolitan hotels which border that historic avenue.

Door boys, hall boys, lift boys, bright with buttons, ushered her along. Walls of Circassian walnut and brocaded silk closed in about her. Voices—American voices—jangled at her ears from groups at tea tables. She hurried through it all to her room. She hated this hotel, that once, eight mortal years ago, had thrilled her with its magnificence. She had longed, these many years, to stop at some peaceful little French hostelry that would distinctly not be on the Rue de Rivoli. This longing recurred now, as she closed the door and wearily tossed her furs on the bed; and it brought resentments. She had to stop here because other solitary woman buyers stopped here. It was the beaten track for such as she. It explained her. It justified her. It gave her moral standing among men whose own moral sense was outrageously complex—which moral standing, duly appraised, stood to her credit at the Hartman store, classified as salary account.

She ordered up a light dinner, and over it studied the letters that demanded answers. Then she set about fram-

ing these answers. This work accomplished, she read her mother's letter, and sat for a little time studying it. Once she sighed. Every way one might turn, it appeared, loomed an eternity of puzzling little problems, personal tangles mostly, that must be thought out faithfully, each in its phase of the moment. She wrote as follows:

"Mother Dear: Yours of the eighth just here to-day. I wrote you a long letter night before last that answers most of your questions, I think. My advice is to go right ahead with Harry's tutor. I'll send another draft to-morrow. And really I don't want you to worry about the money. It will save Harry a year in getting his business start; and surely that's worth a slight extra investment. Now isn't it! You don't seem able to realize, mother, that your daughter is a very successful business woman, more than thirty years old and earning a salary of eight thousand a year. And not a soul to spend it on except myself. Why, I've got more actual income-producing capital laid aside right now than poor old dad ever saw at one time in his whole life.

"As for Margie—It is hard to know what to say. But she's not such a child, though, mother. She'll be twenty this spring. Perhaps that *is* a little premature, as things go nowadays, but we mustn't forget for a moment that she has a good strong head. I don't like John very well myself, but what can we do? It won't help a bit to oppose her. Her best quality, her independence, is against us there. If I were you I'd take the exactly opposite course. Give her her head. Let her have him in to meals—make him feel at home. Don't in any way give her the chance to work up a clandestine romance out of no better material than a sense of injury. The chances are either that she'll gradually get bored to death or else that the rest of us will find out what it is she sees in him.

"I keep fairly well, though very busy. Mr. Hemstead is urging me to take that vacation now that I didn't get last summer, and I've about decided to do it. Things are

going all right at the store. And May Isbell will be quite competent to represent me there for a short time. In all the times I've been over here, I've never really seen anything but a few cities and the Rhine and the inside of a lot of sleeping cars. It certainly seems to be a chance worth taking. So I'm going to turn plain tourist for a month or so. I'll keep you informed as I go along. And don't worry."

After a moment's reflection she crossed out this last sentence. "I mustn't put the suggestion of worry into mother's mind," she thought. "That *would* upset her. I'll keep it natural and offhand, and not suggest or explain any more than is absolutely necessary."

"Tell Margie," thus the conclusion, "I've picked up for her a piece of the loveliest coppery green silk she ever saw. She can feel sure there won't be another frock like it in the United States—not one! It will be wonderful with her hair.

"I'm so glad you've stopped coffee.

"Lots of love. More news later. HILDA."

The envelope addressed, sealed and stamped, she consulted the little traveler's clock that stood in its pigskin case by the inkwell. The hands indicated ten minutes after nine.

She got up and, with knit brows, studied the vari-colored assortment of frocks and suits hanging in her wardrobe trunk, that stood open at the foot of the bed. If it was not to be men's clothes—which would be absurdly out of the question anyway—it had better be something as inconspicuous as possible. She finally selected an old suit of dark serge that she kept for stormy weather and hard traveling. On her rather small feet she drew a pair of

plain walking boots with low boyish heels. She chose a plain black hat, soft with a rolling brim, that fitted down close about her head. Furs she decided against.

Over the old suit she put on a heavy gray coat of homespun, waterproofed. Then she stood before the long mirror and surveyed herself. Her hat brim threw her eyes into partial shadow, quite hiding those faintly wrinkled half moons under them. The eyes sparkled at her from the mirror, and she found herself smiling a little. "You aren't so old!" she thought. It was pleasing, too, to think that her new friend, of the rough but real accomplishments, would find her roughly but well equipped for whatever experience it might be necessary to meet. There was even some amusement in the thought of passing through the imposing lobby of the hotel in this costume.

His card came up then. As she took it from the boy and looked at it, she smiled again. It bore the name, in small black letters, "Albert Moran." Almost unconsciously she ran her thumb over the letters. Yes, they were engraved. She was still smiling as she drew on her short gray gloves and started down-stairs.

But when she confronted her escort of the evening she was caught in a confusion of spirit that, if momentary, was complete. He rose from a chair and came forward to meet her, clad in the fullest of evening dress—glistening "patent leather" shoes, perfectly creased trousers, pleated shirt of the variety known in the men's furnishing department as "semi soft," neat white tie, and thatch of hair brought into a temporary subjection by means of many brushings and some brilliantine. His long black overcoat (not the sables this evening) was shaped to the outlines of his wide shoulders, his curved back, his almost slim waist. His tall hat,

held carefully in his left hand, had been blocked to an unruffled polish. His walking stick, suspended from this same left hand, was heavy and it had a curving handle tipped with silver—the sort of stick known along the boulevards as a *"canne Anglaise."* He wore one white glove, also on his left hand, and held the other crushed against his hat brim. The only jewelry in evidence was his watch chain with a gold sovereign suspended from it.

She saw that he was holding his bare right hand ready either to take her hand or not, according as her inclination might determine. She determined to extend hers, and did so.

Then she found her voice.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I didn't think—I didn't know—" And her troubled eyes roved from his resplendent costume to her own dingy one. "I never dreamed of dressing up. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to wait while I put on something else."

"Don't bother," said he. "You do as you like in Paris. Nobody minds." He did not smile. As all during the afternoon, he was grave, respectful and distinctly unperturbed.

"Would there be time?" she asked.

"Hardly," said he.

She compressed her lips. Then, with a determined little nod, she led the way toward the door. And as he helped her into a taxi and seated himself beside her she was wondering how she could get control of the situation. At the moment he was certainly in command. His very unself-consciousness as he sat quietly there, his willingness to be silent and to concede the same privilege to her, perturbed her the more. For she wanted him to say something. She

wanted the chance to reassert her personality. She knew that it was trivial to feel like this. She ought to rise above it. And she couldn't rise above it. So she bit her lip, sitting motionless there in the dark.

"That's what I like most about Paris," he observed, as they crossed the Place de la Concorde, with its hundreds upon hundreds of soft lights, and entered the shadowy reaches of the Champs Elysées. "Everybody does what they please. They all drink, you know. And I don't drink. They don't care. They just think that's *my* peculiarity and let it go at that. It's different with the Americans that turn up. They're always at you about it. They keep trying to make everybody else do everything they do themselves."

Hilda said something, she hardly knew what. And the conversation drifted on.

Her business experience had been thorough and varied enough to teach her that personal force, the intangible quality that is known, loosely, as "personality," is found in every department of life. She had observed it in salesmen and shipping clerks, in errand girls and bankers. And she could perceive that this man with the slightly crooked nose and the curious eyelid and the remarkably steady eyes had this intangible quality in an extraordinary degree. His vocation was rough, yes. But it called for the extreme of self-control. It called for greater self-control indeed than any man of her acquaintance—excepting Joe Hemstead, perhaps—was capable of exercising. And it must of course call for consummate skill and address.

She recalled how he had looked, earlier in the day, as he walked across the mail room at the American Express, and again she thought of tigers. No loose-minded, self-indul-

gent man (such as you met, mostly) could conceivably look like that. And it was plain, from his gravity and his reticence, from his very silences, that this moral strength—yes, you would have to call it that—was by no means the result of laborious self-discipline; it was simply the native quality of the man.

He gave her some odd bits of information regarding the boxing world of Paris. "They use a lot of our words—'punch,' 'match,' 'round,' 'ring,' and so on. And the verb *'knockouter,'* to knock out."

She smiled vaguely, wondering if any one would be "knocked out" this evening; and wondering, too, how she would take it if it happened. She must not show weakness; not to this man.

They walked in through the plaster and iron gateway of the amusement park among a crowd of eager, jostling French boys. Some of these looked distinctly rough; perhaps he would yet prove to be wrong and she right in the matter of dress.

But when they entered the great structure of steel and glass, with its overhead decorations of flags and colored lights, its hundreds of rows of chairs, nearly all occupied, and its elevated square "ring" in the center with white ropes enclosing it and a bunch of blazing white lights directly above it, she was conscious, confused in some inextricable way with her immense relief at finding herself in so cleanly attractive a place, of a sinking of heart.

For there were very nearly half as many women as men among the several thousand spectators, and nearly all were in bright evening costume. Everywhere one looked there was the spectacle of bare white necks and shoulders outlined against the black evening coats of the men. The occasional

vacant chairs were piled high with gay opera wraps and heaps of furs. Here and there groups of officers supplied touches of red cloth and the glint of metal.

Miss Wilson, following a girl usher down the long aisle to a seat only three rows from the ringside, felt like a gray sparrow among birds of paradise.

III

TWO PERSONS OF DISTINCT PUBLIC IMPORTANCE, WITH A MOMENT'S IDLE SPECULATION AS TO WHICH MIGHT PROVE THE BETTER MAN, SHOULD THEY MEET IN A BUSINESS WAY

A MATCH was in progress. Two big men, stripped to short trunks, canvas shoes, and padded brown gloves, with red-brown stains on them, were sparring and striking. Their finely trained bodies glistened in that blazing white light. She could hear their heavy breathing, and the soft pad-pad-pad of their feet on the canvas-covered platform—and now and then the thud of a cleanly placed blow.

A gong ran. The men turned wearily to their corners; and numbers of attendants in white clothing scrambled in through the ropes with buckets and bottles and stools and sponges, and bath towels that they waved frantically.

Miss Wilson looked about at the audience. Many of the women, while perhaps a bit overdressed, were beautiful, and seemed not unlike the women one saw at the Opéra Comique. The men, for the most part, appeared to be average, well-to-do Parisians, with well-trimmed spade beards or carefully groomed mustaches. So far they were quiet enough; decorous, even. The loud talk and the occasional shouting came from the crowded rows of men and boys in the galleries.

She reflected, as had so many thousands of Anglo-Saxon observers before her, on the impersonal quality of the Pa-

risian and the Parisienne—on their extraordinary openness to facts of any sort, on their almost complete freedom from prejudice, moral or otherwise, on their good-humored attention to anything that was for any reason interesting. That was why they came to this rough spectacle; because it was interesting to them. In her own mind she was apologizing for being here at all. They were doing nothing of the sort. She was dependent on the routine of her habitual environment. At this very moment she was something at a loss because she had, with such travail of spirit, brought herself to cut loose from that environment. Not so these Parisians—they acted and felt here exactly as they would act and feel anywhere else. And while she listened with half an ear to Moran's occasional quiet remarks and replied to them, her inner mind was dwelling on that keen bit of observation he had quoted—"It isn't that they're better than us, or worse. It's only that their safety valve is set lower."

The gong rang, and the fight was resumed. She watched it with more assurance than at first. It *was* rough; but she was coming to see that it offered opportunities for quickness of thought, as well as of action, and really unlimited openings for judgment and courage—for character, of a sort.

This round ended the bout. Moran explained that it was the last of the regimental championships, and added that it was not particularly interesting. "Those boys are only the best of a lot of amateurs. Third raters."

He said this without a smile, and without a trace of condescension; simply stated it as a fact.

She replied, gazing thoughtfully at the fat announcer in evening clothes who was reaching down through the ropes for the slips of paper on which the decisions of the several judges were recorded—"It isn't so hard to watch as I feared.

I'm not sure that it isn't just about the wholesomest thing I've ever seen in Paris. They don't seem to go in for things so direct and honest as boxing, usually."

He flashed a blunt glance at her, then looked away. "There are worse things than boxing," he said, simply but with an unmistakable touch of feeling—the first she had caught in him.

The next match was what he termed the main preliminary. A blond French lightweight against a Jewish boy from Philadelphia, who bore the name of Spider O'dell. This proved to be quite a different affair from the preceding. "You'll see a little class now," observed her escort; and within a very few moments she realized what he meant. These boxers were slim, alert, soft-skinned and nimble as wood sprites. They sparred, feinted, and danced about, exchanging blows so rapidly that the untrained eye could not at any given moment follow what was taking place. They studied each other with cool eyes, never for an instant relaxing from a high nervous tension that soon transmitted itself to the audience. Men and women alike edged forward on their chairs. Waves of excitement swept the gallery crowds and brought them repeatedly to their feet. There was a steady patter of applause and shouts and cries that rose at short intervals into thunders of cheering.

Round by round the two youthful masters of their craft went about their work—always quick, always tense, at moments breaking out into whirlwinds of energy that were never fevered, never anything but calculated; and that yet were carried through with a speed of execution that left one breathless. More than once Hilda found herself applauding, during those moments when the great building was rocking with the clapping of thousands of hands, the stamping of thousands of feet, the cheering of thousands

of throats. But the two boys went on, unheeding of everything outside those white ropes, as if there was nothing in the world but the task before them.

"Why," she cried, close to Moran's ear, "they're positively businesslike about it!"

"Of course," he replied. "It *is* business!"

The match was to go ten rounds. In the seventh it became evident that the Frenchman was tiring. He moved more slowly; heavily, at times. More and more frequently he dodged inside a blow and clung close to the Spider. Hilda wondered how on earth he ever managed to do it. It was odd, too, that the only safe place for him in that ring should be close to his opponent, too close for effective hitting.

There was an almost steady roar now from all parts of the house. Once, when she leaned back and put her hands over her ears, she became aware that Moran was studying her with a trace of concern on his face; so she dropped her hands, smiled, and sat straight up again.

Then she saw something that brought an outright laugh to her lips. In the very front row, near the corner of the ring, sat a woman of at least sixty or sixty-five, with hair nearly white beneath her black bonnet, black gown adorned with jet ornaments, and face that Hilda instantly characterized as "sweet," calmly following the tide of battle through an ebony-handled lorgnette. She called Moran's attention to this, and he smiled.

One fact that she was again becoming aware of, now that her mind was in some measure adjusted to the occasion, was the distinct public importance of her escort. If he had seemed a celebrity at the tango tea, he was to-night, in this, his own world, very nearly a great personage. Spectators all about them, in the lulls between rounds, were pointing

him out. And the rougher men, specimens of what she was beginning to recognize as the boxing type, who came and went about the ringside, were plainly eager to speak to him and elated to receive a nod in return.

The gong announced the conclusion of the tenth round. The Spider was acclaimed *vainqueur;* and the two fighters muffled in bath robes and each followed by a little file of managers, handlers and admirers, made their way out through the crowd.

Now followed a bustle of confusion about the ring. Blushing eager youths of various sizes from the French provinces, from England, from America, from Australia, climbed into the ring and stood in awkward attitudes while the fat announcer bellowed out formal introductions. Self-important persons rushed about among the press tables, whispering excitedly to this man and that. A new referee appeared, an Englishman; his sleeves rolled up and his soft shirt open at the neck.

Two of the self-important ones came over and urged Moran to get up into the ring for an introduction. But the personage merely shook his head, without the faintest appearance of interest on his solid face. Arguments were advanced, only to be met by that same pointblank refusal.

Hilda felt a thousand pairs of eyes on him and on herself. Never in her life had she felt so conspicuous.

The self-important ones finally gave it up and went away. Moran called her attention to a tall young man standing at the ringside, chatting with a group of acquaintances. "Carpentier," he said.

"Why," she murmured, in fresh surprise, "he's very good-looking!"

"Nice fellow," responded Moran.

The great French champion, it appeared, had recently

been given a grant of money by the government for upholding the honor of his country in the realms of sport. "After he knocked Wells out," Moran added, and smiled faintly. "Wells keeps on getting put to sleep, but it doesn't seem to hurt his reputation a bit in England."

"What is the matter with him?" she asked, glad of a chance to draw out her escort on his own topic.

"Clever boxer," he replied, "but he has what the newspaper boys call a glass jaw." And he fell silent again.

The great champion turned away from the group about him and looked about the house. The gallery boys were shouting so lustily at him that he finally gave them a smile and a nod. Others on the main floor—even the bearded ones in evening dress—were calling his name; and for a moment he could only bow in all directions, occasionally waving his hand with extraordinary lightness and grace. Then his eyes rested on the silent man at Hilda's side; and his young fair face became suddenly illuminated. He walked straight over toward them with hand outstretched.

Moran rose to greet him. He was the shorter, a trifle; but stockier. Hilda could not help reflecting, as she stole a glance upward at the two great men of this outlandish world, that her escort was the solider and the stronger. His almost stolid reserve, too, was pleasing to her beside the frankly Gallic effusiveness of the champion. "Probably he is not so quick," she thought, herself now almost a part of this picturesque environment; "but somewhere in him he must have some of that fire and go I've seen to-night. A man could hardly get to be as prominent as he is without earning the position some way." She even yielded to the notion that now, having come to know him a little, and having learned what this business of boxing is like, it would be interesting to see him in action. "If he does meet Carpen-

tier, I'll make some one bring me to see it," she decided then and there. "That is, if I'm in Paris."

A puzzling element in the situation was the friendly relationship that plainly existed between the two fighters. Though it occurred to her that their very prominence would naturally draw them together. "Men at the top of any profession get lonely," she reflected. "They can't really chum with their subordinates and followers. It's got to be some one else who's at the top. And then of course it *is* a business." Indeed, she knew from her own experience how one comes to admire and even feel a sort of affection for a business rival who is vigorous and aggressive enough to stir one and bring out one's own stronger qualities.

Moran turned now, and with a trace of shyness introduced the Frenchman; and she found herself clasping his firm big hand. He spoke English to her.

There was a new commotion about the ring, and new cheering from the galleries. Groups of men were pushing in through the crowded aisles.

A huge barrel of a man, an Englishman, stepped up into the ring and seated himself on one of the stools. He wore a coat about his shoulders.

There was another commotion, and a genuine uproar from the crowd. A high-shouldered, round-headed negro appeared in the corner opposite the Englishman. He threw off his bath robe, and stood grinning there, a great stocky fighting machine, all muscle, his skin reflecting the light like polished mahogany.

There was a flutter of discussion and confusion. The self-important were about the ring in swarms. Bandaged hands were examined by critical eyes. The gloves were adjusted. Then, one by one, the self-important dropped down between the ropes, until only the white man, the

black man and the referee were left. The gong clanged. A dramatic hush settled over the great audience.

The two men stepped to mid-ring, touched hands in a perfunctory greeting, and squared off. They circled once, slowly. The negro threw out his open left hand in a quick feint, then brought his right fist forward and downward in a short choppy blow that terminated on the chin of his opponent.

The Englishman sank to his knees, then dropped forward on his hands. His head sagged clear to the canvas and rested there; and he pivoted around it in a floundering circle while the referee stood over him, deliberately counting him out. Then the handlers rushed into the ring and half carried, half dragged him to his corner. The negro was already putting on his bath robe, his evening's work done.

Hilda, sitting rigid on the extreme edge of her chair, her eyes staring, her face chalk white, was only dimly conscious of the tremendous angry roar that shook the building. The thing had literally taken her breath away.

Moran had risen and was bending over her. "Come," he said, "let's get out. That's all. And the crowd is mad!"

He took her arm and hurried out the long aisle between solid ranks of screaming, gesticulating men and women. At the outer door she stopped and leaned against the wall to get her breath.

"What is it?" she asked. "Why are they so angry?"

"Oh, these people charged big prices to-night—announced it as a championship match. And there's nothing to it, you see. He just hit him once. They are calling it a frame-up. They want their money back."

Then they were out in the night air. She was limp with fatigue, but nervously alight with excitement.

He hailed a taxi, and handed her in; then hesitated.

"Maybe you'd like a bite to eat somewhere before you go home," he suggested, as if uncertain what would be best.

"Oh, yes," she said quickly—"anywhere! Anything. I can't stop now." When he still hesitated, she suggested Lavenue's. So they skimmed back through the cool night, down the Champs Elysées, over the river, and through dim streets to the brightly lighted old restaurant that was essaying bravely to dispel the gloomy shadows of the great Montparnasse Station across the little square.

IV

IN WHICH IT APPEARS THAT DAME NATURE, PROMPTED BY HER TRADITIONAL ABHORRENCE OF A VACUUM, HAS ALREADY ACTED IN THE MATTER OF HILDA

LAVENUE'S was warm. Food and music were good. In the upholstered corners of the inner restaurant, one hardly heard the noisy chatter of the crowded café beyond the front partition. The food and the sip of wine steadied Hilda, and the music soothed her spirit.

She was beginning to feel comfortable now with the redoubtable Moran. Almost always men were more or less subtly aggressive with her, to so great an extent that she kept on her guard with them as a matter of course and all the time. But this man was not aggressive at all. It piqued her that he was not. He drank none of the wine, but expanding gradually in this warm atmosphere of physical well being, became more talkative.

In response to her shrewd questions, he told her much about the boxing business—the sort of boys that are attracted to it, the exacting nature of the work, relations between boxers and their managers, ultimate money rewards. Her quick grasp on the practical side of it appealed to him; until finally she knew that he was talking to her as directly and frankly as he would have talked to a man. He even voiced his surprise, saying—

"I never met a lady before that I could talk to this way."

"So?" she remarked, smiling a little, and looking off at

the violinist, who was so amusingly like a well-fed young Beethoven. "I'm a business woman, you see."

"But the business women I've seen couldn't ask intelligent questions about the boxing game. They weren't interested."

Hilda's smile faded, slowly. She lowered her eyes, and thoughtfully turned a salt shaker round and round between her slim fingers.

"I worked for a very big man once," she said then, soberly. "It was my first job. His name was Harris Doreyn —The Doreyn Company, in Chicago. If I know anything I learned it from him. And one thing he impressed upon me above everything else was that I must always keep my mind open to new facts—no matter what."

He thought this over, deliberately, with knit brows. She covertly watched him as he worked it out, and then nodded. He was not a rapid thinker. But she felt that he would be thorough.

"I take it you're a success in business," said he, a little later.

"Oh, yes," she replied, "I suppose you would have to call me a success."

"And you've made good young."

"Young?" A faint smile, that had in it something akin to bitterness, curled the corners of her mouth. "My dear man, I'm a thousand years old."

He frankly didn't understand this. So she changed the subject.

"Listen," she said, "what on earth are those crazy children doing with a baby?"

He visibly collected his thoughts. "Oh," he replied then, "that's a queer story, too. We've only had it since morning."

"You don't mean that it is less than a day old?"

"Oh, no. About two months."

"And they were giving it paregoric!" she mused, aloud. Then, "Where's its mother?"

"In the hospital at Auteuil. She's a girl that was dancing at the Parnasse."

"Where's the father, then?"

Moran hesitated, then said—"He died last week. It's been very hard on Juliette—not like most of these Paris cases. He was really in love with her. They were to have been married this week. Pretty decent of him, too, the way these French people look at things. You see, she couldn't bring him anything—she had no *dot*. His death broke her all up. She's been walking around with a fever, and last night she went to pieces."

She liked him for his simple way of telling the pitiful little story. Then she fell to thinking of the baby.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" she asked.

"Girl," said he.

"What do those chorus girls know about babies?"

"Not very much."

"They're such helpless little things!"

He made no reply, and for a little time they were silent. The well-fed young Beethoven was playing the hackneyed but haunting Humoresque, of Dvorak, with muted strings. Hilda felt rather than heard the plaintive melody. Her thoughts were on babies—plump little soft-skinned creatures, with fat legs and dimpled knees.

"I helped bring up my young sister and brother," said she, speaking as much to the salt shaker as to him. He inclined his head. "So much depends on taking just the right care of them."

They were silent again.

"Listen," said she. "How are they managing to-night? Aren't all those girls busy at the Parnasse?"

"Yes, they're working. But one of the hotel maids is staying around."

"That isn't right," said Hilda. "You can't just leave a baby with anybody."

"What are you going to do?" said he. "There's the way it is."

"And it has colic."

"Nothing serious, the doctor said."

"But don't you see, everything depends on the feeding. You can't do it offhand. I know babies, and you can't. How often do they feed it? At regular times?"

"Oh, no. When it cries, mostly."

"Do they measure the amounts?"

"I don't know about that. I don't think so." A moment later he said, bluntly, "You wouldn't want to come around and look things over, would you?"

"Look things over? How do you mean?"

"Why, I'll tell you"— he was a thought embarrassed now—"I don't think myself that baby's going to get the right kind of care in that crowd. And it's serious, you know."

"Yes," said she, thoughtfully, "it *is* serious."

"That's what I said to myself to-night. I've never been so close to a baby as this. And it struck me—'This little thing's alive.' And, like you said, it's helpless. Seems to me it ought to be kept quiet and fed real carefully. Those girls *are* crazy, you know. They keep grabbing it up, and cuddling it, and fighting over it. I told them they'd excite it too much. And Blondie gave it some candy."

Hilda sat straight up and turned her eyes full on his. "Good heavens!" she cried. "That's awful!"

"That's what I thought," said he. "I got the candy out of its mouth with my finger. Of course, I know you couldn't give much time to it, but if you *would* come around to-morrow and sort of look things over . . ."

She was pursing her lips, and turning the salt shaker round and round, very slowly.

"I'll come," she said. And added, in a low tone, "I've got time enough for that—or something."

It occurred to Hilda that night, in a sleepless interval between efforts to fix her mind on the novel that lay propped on her knees, that the really sensible thing would have been to go directly to that baby and take charge. It would have been easy enough to arrange. Moran, the four American dancers, and several of the English chorus girls were staying at a little "American plan" hotel in the crowded district behind the Madeleine. She could have got a room there for herself and taken the baby right in with her for the night.

Still, there was the practical side of the situation to consider. She knew, for one thing, that she was dreadfully tired. All night the back of her head ached. And confused mental images of sweaty, nearly naked men in short trunks and blood-stained boxing gloves came and went in her mind until she could have got up, dressed, and, in sheer desperation, tramped about the streets. At moments, she even thought seriously of doing this, feeling that it might so exhaust her as to make sleep possible. But these impulses were always followed by the more sober reflection that the last thing on earth she could do would be to tramp about Paris, alone, in the small hours of morning. She was not even certain that had the matter been presented to her for a decision, she could have brought herself to go, late at night with her new and grotesquely fascinating friend to his

little theatrical hotel, even for the purpose of caring for that pathetically homeless and helpless baby.

For Hilda Wilson's was by no means an unconventional nature. If she was stirring with resentments and incipient rebellions, these were quite vague in her mind. They did stir her. They had, it appeared, worn her nerves dangerously close to the breaking point. They had got her into her present difficulty, making it necessary for her to give up her strong positive hold on life, her work. But they meant nothing more to her consciousness than an acutely personal problem.

The trouble was, doubtless, that with the job gone, there were no other interests in her life to takes its place. Nothing that she could lay hold on. And the job, for the present, was certainly gone. She could not reconsider after sending that cablegram to Joe Hemstead. He had never yet seen outright indecision in her, even in small matters. . . . She could not reconsider, anyway. For she was in no condition to carry the job.

No, a rest was indicated. But how on earth was she to get it? As she considered the difficulties that beset a youngish and distinctively attractive woman who may venture to travel aimlessly and unescorted about Europe, bitter feelings arose within her. It was difficult enough to manage, even with the job to steady one.

The fact appeared to be that she couldn't rest. The most she could hope to do would be to substitute some other positive interest for the job. If she could really manage this, it might work out as an equivalent to a rest. Or it might not.

She tried again to follow her novel. But never much of a reader, she felt the want of a reading habit to aid her in fixing her attention on the manufactured characters of

the story. There suddenly flashed into her mind the problem of Annie Haggerty, the bundle wrapper in her department, who had "gone wrong." She had very properly regarded Annie as a demoralizing influence, and had urged strongly that she be dismissed. But Mr. Martin, backed as usual by Joe Hemstead, had pleaded for the girl. They were keeping her there now. She must talk with May Isbell about that. "Welfare work" was all right enough—a good thing, indeed—but there were practical limits. Then she fell to thinking again of tiger-like men, shining with sweat, who tore savagely at each other. . . .

Many times during the night she came to the definite decision that she would keep away from Moran and his dancing and singing acquaintances; that she would even keep away from the baby, whose story had touched deep warm places within her. She thought, in swift flashes, of difficulties that would arise. It was erratic. It would be hard to explain. No, better an irresponsible journey.

But in the morning she did precisely what she had told Blink Moran she would do—went to the little "American plan" theatrical hotel back of the Madeleine. She even went earlier than she had intended.

It was of no particular use to think about substituting some other positive interest for the job. That matter had been taken out of her hands on the preceding afternoon when she went to a *"thé* tango" in a taxi with a well-dressed, dignified prize-fighter and a badly dressed dancing girl with cow eyes. And she had seen rough men in an activity which was, it appeared, a business, and which had proved, as an experience, unexpectedly and intensely vital. Indeed, as she hurried through her breakfast and ordered a cab, it seemed to her that, underlying the confusions of that nearly sleepless night, the intention to do precisely

this thing had never for an instant wavered. If she gave virtually no thought as to where this course might lead her, it was because she had already accepted it.

The rooms at the Hotel de l'Amerique—for such it was called—were not large, but they were reasonably clean. Hilda found the baby sleeping restlessly on a cot in the room occupied by Millicent and Blondie. The window was closed tight, and the air was heavy. The two girls were there, Blondie in bed, dozing heavily, with the remains of a *petit dejeuner* on a chair at her elbow; Millicent, in a somewhat ragged negligee, was brushing her teeth. Adele, who brought Hilda in, was dressed for the day. She looked white and tired.

Hilda and Adele stood by the cot, looking down at the new little human being.

"It isn't very fat," whispered Hilda.

"Not very," said Adele, ruefully.

The baby's eyelids opened and the eyes rolled, exposing the whites; then the lids closed again. The corners of its little mouth curved upward. The lips were none too red.

"That's colic," observed Hilda. "No mistake about it."

"I'm afraid so," replied Adele.

Hilda looked at the rumpled hair and sleep-flushed complexion of the girl in the bed, and at the muss of breakfast things on the tray. She took in again the torn negligee of Millicent, who was now using a towel vigorously. She considered the litter of clothing and newspapers on the chairs and the floor. For a moment she stared thoughtfully out the window at a nest of chimney pots. "I've certainly got to do something," she thought. "I can't just loaf. Never in the world.

"See here," she said, "I'm going to move in here and take care of this baby myself. Probably I can get a room."

"Oh—will you!" breathed Adele, with suddenly shining eyes and a tremulous smile. "I've worried so. It would be *such* a help!"

Accordingly Hilda engaged a room on the same floor. By early afternoon she had packed her wardrobe trunk and removed it from the big hotel on the Rue de Rivoli. She decided to keep her room there for the present. Otherwise May Isbell would wonder; and the men of Armandeville et Cie.

Before evening a baby's sleeping basket, decorated with pink ribbons, had been delivered at the Hotel de l'Amerique; and an alcohol lamp, and a dozen graduated feeding bottles, and tins of food preparations; and many bundles of white clothing. Also a clinical thermometer and other small parcels from the drug store. Blue and white porcelain bottles of very costly milk came from the *laiterie* in the Rue des Mathurins. And a book on the care of infants from the American book store.

At all which signs of personal authority and organizing ability, Adele and Millicent looked with frank and complete admiration. Blondie said it was kind of the lady.

V

BLINK MORAN ON DIET AND THE HUMAN MACHINE, ALSO ON THE HONEY BEE. AND A FAINT ANALOGY

IT WAS nearly six o'clock in the afternoon when Hilda responded to a tap at her door with a low-spoken, "Come in!"

At the moment the baby was engaged in sucking the two middle fingers of her right hand and staring up at the snowy curtains of the basket that now constituted her little world. She had been objecting to this little world, only a few moments earlier, with a violence that opened her mouth wide and changed her color through the various shades of red and purple to something near navy blue. In another few moments, if the average experience of this extraordinary afternoon might be accepted as a reasonable basis for prediction, she would object again. At present she was calm.

The door opened softly, and Blink Moran tiptoed in. Hilda smiled. She was glad to see him. If the way these dancing and prize-fighting persons plainly had of visiting one another's rooms at all hours and in various casual degrees of negligee did seem more extremely unconventional than any mode of life that she had hitherto known, at least they were all quite wholesomely unconscious of it. The obvious thing to do, since she had intruded herself into this odd atmosphere, was to accept it. This, with an occasional recurrence of the queer sensation of unreality that

had first risen within her on the preceding day, she was now endeavoring to do. Moran, at least, was always fully dressed when she saw him.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

She nodded, still smiling. "Come and look," she said. Adding, "You needn't be so terribly quiet. She's awake."

He stood by her, looking down at the wholly unreasonable but definitely individualized bit of humanity in the basket.

"Funny little thing," he mused soberly. "I suppose we all looked like that once."

Hilda laughed softly, and nodded toward a chair. She herself dropped to the stool that she had placed beside the basket.

Moran glanced at her, thoughtfully. She was dressed in a simple white shirt-waist and dark skirt. Her chestnut hair was done up about her head in a way that, while simple, emphasized its abundance. She still looked tired; but there was a rather firm set to her mouth, and her eyes were steady. He thought of these eyes now, really for the first time. They were gray-blue in color; and you remembered them. He knew that he would remember them. Yesterday and last evening, at the Parnasse and the boxing match and Lavenue's, she had not looked like this. He could not say what the difference was, but certainly she now appeared surer of herself. She had told him that she was a business woman. He now decided that she was a capable one. She had a book in her hand, and was marking a place with a slim finger.

She caught him looking curiously at the volume, and held it up. "The baby book," she explained. "I'm studying it."

"Oh," said he. "But you told me last night that you knew about babies."

"I helped bring up two," she replied. "But that was a good while ago." Her face sobered. "You don't remember all the things you pick up at such a time—medical knowledge, and all that. A baby's a job, you know; a very definite job. And every baby's different. You've got to study your baby. And you can't make mistakes. You can't, you know. So the only thing to do is the right thing, every time."

He thought this over during a long moment; then slowly nodded. "Yes," he said, "I suppose that's so. I never thought of it."

She opened the book and turned the pages reflectively. "No," she repeated, "it's no good making mistakes with babies. And you can't bank on what you only think you know—things you half remember, opinions and such. I worked for a big man once, Harris Doreyn, of Chicago,"—she checked herself, glanced swiftly up, then looked down again at the book—"oh, I told you about him last night. He used to say, 'Your opinions are no better than your information. Let's have your information.' I thought of that this morning, and so I'm getting up my information about babies."

He rose and stood looking at the prettily arranged basket while thinking about the woman there on the low seat beside it. He had never known quite such a woman. He didn't see why she should come in here and take hold in this fine way; but he did see that the baby had brought her to life astonishingly. "But then, babies do take hold of women," he thought. "That's natural. It's their game."

"I'm going over by the American Express," he said; "shall I ask for your mail?"

"Thank you," said she. "If you don't mind."

Then he left; forgetting that he needn't be so terribly

quiet; tiptoeing out and closing the door with great care. Hilda watched him as he closed the door. Never in her life had she seen so big a man move with such lightness.

He was back in less than an hour with her letters; chatting for a moment, then going along. These had little interest for her. They were but fluttering bits of paper from a remote life in a remote land. Several times while she glanced hastily through them the baby's whimperings drew her attention. There was a cable from Joe Hemstead that called for a moment's thought. She mentally built out the gaps between the words. Stanley Aitcheson, it appeared, had left the Hartman store a week earlier. "That must have been just after Mr. Hemstead wrote the letter that came yesterday," she mused, with half a frown. But it had only this day become clear that he had sailed for Cherbourg. His father was worried; and J. H. was cabling Armandeville's to look after him and send him back if possible.

This was awkward. She thought it over while smoothing out the bedding under the restless baby, and draping a steamer rug over a chair-back to shield the little eyes from the light. She knelt for a time beside the basket and studied the tiny head as it lay quiet for the moment, on the muslin-covered mattress. The nose was a mere button, as baby noses should be. The eyes, she thought, were going to be brown. She would have preferred blue. The little cheeks were none too plump. Very well—she would see to that. And the knees, she knew, down there under the warm little puff, were hardly what you would call dimpled. But that, she considered, could be managed. A baby, as she had told Moran, is a job. It would be a matter of experimenting with various foods until they could work out

"Babies do take hold of women," he thought. "That's natural. It's their game."

the precisely right mixture for the delicate little body to digest and assimilate with the minimum of effort. They had had to work out a similar problem with her brother Harry; and that was years back, before the modern understanding of baby problems had been arrived at.

It was rather surprising, even to herself, that she should take such a deep enjoyment in the detail of ministering to this helpless little person—after all these years of giving her attention and her strength to a very different sort of thing. One small hand lay outside the puff. She took it gently in her own. It was pitifully thin. There ought to be dimples here, as on the knees—one dimple for each tiny knuckle. She looked again at the round little head. It was a dark baby, with almost black hair. She wished it were light. She liked blue eyes and bald heads covered with soft fuzz.

The baby whimpered, caught its breath, opened its mouth and set out into an exhibition of an astonishingly strong equipment of lungs. Hilda patted the wriggling body, and spoke soothingly. The little face deepened in color and wrinkled. The noise grew in volume.

Hilda looked about her, in momentary helplessness. "It isn't feeding time," she thought—"not for half an hour. And the book says not to pick it up."

But soothing words had no effect. Neither did the picking up process, when Hilda weakened. She replaced her little charge in the basket, lighted the alcohol lamp and set a pail of water over it, and placed a bottle in the water. The neck of the bottle was carefully closed with absorbent cotton. She had taken it from a small tin refrigerator, where its fellows nestled among several small cakes of that one rarest commodity in all Paris—ice.

As she moved back and forth, now trying to soothe the outraged baby, now testing the water with her finger and taking the bottle out to shake it, she thought of Stanley Aitcheson. Yes, it would be awkward should he find her. And very likely he would find her. He would be persistent—exigent, even. He must not know that she had moved over to this queer little hotel. He must not know about the baby; or about Blink Moran.

She sighed and pressed her hand at the back of her head. She must be very careful indeed. The thought irked her. She frowned and compressed her lips, then shrugged her shoulders. She would face the facts as they might develop. The thing to do now was to wash her hands, take a rubber nipple from the cup of boracic acid solution on the window-sill and put it on the bottle. Already, she felt, she was growing less clumsy in these little matters. Within another day or so she would be deft enough at it. She seated herself beside the basket and slipped the nipple into the wide-open mouth. Instantly there was peace.

At half past ten that night Moran tapped and tiptoed in. The baby was sleeping, restlessly, and at times snuffling a little.

"Got a cold," Moran whispered, looking down at it.

"A little," said she. "The doctor was in. He says he wouldn't think much of the cold if she were only a little stronger. The thing now is to work out this feeding problem and build up her strength. Sit down—the armchair. They *don't* go in very strongly for comfort in this hotel."

"Not very," said he. Then, "Have you been right here all the time?"

She nodded. "I don't mind."

He thought this over. "You ought to get out. Weren't the girls back at all?"

"Only at dinner time. Adele was in. But only for a moment."

"Of course, she has to be at the Parnasse early to dress for the review. But couldn't you have left the floor maid here for a little while? Just so you could get in a short walk?"

Hilda smiled and shook her head. "Not until I get this business in hand. I started weighing her to-day," she indicated a baby scale in white enamel that stood behind the closet door. "She's almost twenty ounces under weight, according to the table of weights in the book. I'll keep track every day now."

He studied the scale during a long moment. "Look here," he observed, "aren't you getting into this thing pretty deep? It must be a good deal of an expense."

"I know," she replied. "But I'd likely be spending it some other way." She gazed down at the dark little head among the shadows of the diminutive puff. "It's got hold of me, I guess. I'm not the loafing kind. I have to be doing something. I was all at sea yesterday. You see, I had had to make up my mind that I was too tired to go back to my job and didn't know what on earth to do with myself." She interrupted herself with a nervous little laugh. "This baby is just the thing, you see."

He inclined his head. "That explains it," said he.

"Explains what?"

"You looked tired last night. To-night you look reasonably fit."

He seemed quite unaware that his attitude was distinctly personal. She saw that, as usual, he was merely speaking out what was uppermost in his mind. But none the less, she changed the subject. "When do the—the girls get back from the theater?"

"Two or three o'clock."

"Two or three in the morning?" She was a thought startled.

He nodded. "There's a supper show after the regular performance. They have to work at that, too."

"But isn't that pretty hard?"

"Oh, of course. But it goes with the job."

She gave some thought to this. It was, to say the least, an irregular life these young folks were leading. Millicent and Blondie fitted into it naturally enough, and young Harper; but Adele seemed different.

She voiced this thought. He seemed to agree with her; but said merely, "Adele's a good kid."

"She doesn't seem so crazy as the others," Hilda went on, pressing the point a little. For new and confused speculations were stirring in her mind regarding the lives and relationships of these young Americans, so curiously adrift in Europe. "She has some sense of responsibility."

"Oh, yes," said he, "she's got that."

"And she looks honest."

"Oh, Adele's honest."

It was no use. Blink was impenetrable. She pondered a little whether he employed the word "honest" in the same sense as she did.

One fact regarding her prize-fighter she found downright refreshing. He was simple; he was wholesome; he was, she decided, "comfortable." He had dropped his coat, hat and stick on her bed without a self-conscious thought. Aware every moment of the tenseness of her own nerves, she envied the perfect physical ease with which he sat in the shabby chair, resting his solid head against the back and his big hands on the chair-arms. She was hardly conscious now

of the Gothic eyelid that had struck her, at first, as so grotesque; for she was beginning to feel comfortably acquainted with the calm blue eye beneath it. It did seem odd that he should be sitting here in her room, at eleven o'clock at night, visiting with her in the low confidential voice that the presence of the baby made advisable. But the conventional resistance to the fact that now and then flared up within her invariably flickered out when she looked at his big relaxed frame and found herself listening to the observations that emanated from his slow but thoughtful mind. The moment came when she deliberately decided—"He isn't even thinking about it. He's just natural. Then why shouldn't I be natural, too? Even if they've never let me before."

"Funny," he was saying. "I never thought about working out a baby's diet this way. But when you do come to think of it—why, it's the thing, of course. I haven't seen many babies; but I know it's true of dogs and horses. And it's the way we boxers have to do all the time. It isn't just exercise, you know—it's what we put into ourselves, the right proportions of foods and the right kinds. And just so much or so little water. I have to agree, you know, to make exactly a certain weight at a certain hour, one month, two months, six months off. And not only that—I have to deliver myself in perfect physical condition at that exact weight. You say this baby is twenty ounces under weight: all right, let's bring it up to weight."

Hilda regarded him with deepening interest. He had the power to take her out of her discordant self; for which fact she was grateful.

He was reflecting. "The greatest things on diet are bees."

"Bees!" Hilda exclaimed softly. She was smiling.

He nodded. "My father's in the business. Out in Michigan. It's queer—you can't work around bees without getting interested in them. You know they seem to do a lot of things better than we do."

"I don't know anything about them," murmured Hilda.

"Why, they can make a queen bee out of an ordinary egg just by the difference in feeding. And they never make any mistakes."

"Who are they?" asked Hilda.

"The workers. They're the females, you know. But they don't lay eggs. Only the queen does that—for the whole hive. The workers go out and get the honey and manufacture it, and make the wax for the cells, and clean house, and feed the little grubs, and fight now and then, and fan air into the hive with their wings when it's hot. . . . I was going to tell you about the feeding. When they figure out that they need a queen they feed the white grub, as soon as it hatches from the egg, a kind of jelly that they make in their heads."

"In their heads?"

"Yes. They give this jelly to the worker grubs, too, but only for three days. The grub that's picked for a queen is fed on this jelly until it's grown. They call it royal jelly in the books. But you see, they really make two different kinds of bees from the same kind of egg, just by feeding them differently. That's what I meant."

"So the females are the workers," mused Hilda. Analogies rose in her mind.

"Yes," said he. "Mostly they work all the time, every day, until they die. That's all they do—just work."

"Funny thing, though," he went on, after a moment,

"they aren't so simple as that sounds. Sometimes they seem to go sort of crazy."

"I should think they would," mused Hilda; but she did not say it aloud.

"It's generally when the flowers run out and they can't get much honey in the fields. They get to robbing other hives—or jam pots in the pantry—most anything, just so long as it's sweet. Sometimes, when mother was putting up preserves, it was fierce. She couldn't tell what to do. They get all demoralized. They get honey drunk. And you have to outwit them, one way or another, and make them take up their work again."

The analogies were at large in Hilda's mind. She was looking down at the sleeping baby now. Her color had risen a very little.

"Tell me," she asked abruptly, "how is her mother?" At the word "her," she indicated the baby with a movement of her head.

As usual, he was a little slow in following her apparent change of thought. But after a moment he replied, "Pretty sick."

Hilda bit her lip, still gazing at the tiny form under the warm covers. Her eyes were bright.

She got up now, and turned away from him, busying herself over the cups and plates that stood in a row on the window-sill. She heard him as he rose.

"Don't get up," she said. "I just thought of something."

"I'm tiring you."

"No," said she; "on the contrary, you have rested me."

He noted her bright eyes and the color in her cheeks, and shook his head. He picked up his coat hat and stick, moved over to the door, then hesitated.

"Tell me," she asked, "what do they do in France with children that aren't—well, when the parents weren't married?"

"Different things," he replied. "There used to be a place where they dropped them into a sort of chute, to be taken care of by the city. Sometimes, I guess, the mothers keep them. There are a good many of them here, you know. The French people aren't so down on them as we are."

Other questions were trembling on Hilda's lips. So she compressed those lips and shut the questions back.

But he still hesitated, there at the door.

"You know—" he began, then paused.

"What?" said she.

"Well, I think you'd better let us come in on the expense."

"Oh, that's all right—" she broke out; then saw that he definitely intended to "come in." He looked solid and strong in purpose, standing erect there by the door with his hand on the knob. "Of course, if you feel that way. . . ."

"I do," said he. "And I know the others will. We all know Juliette, you see."

"Of course," replied Hilda. "That is so." He had a strong sense of responsibility, this man. And he puzzled her more than a little. For a brief moment, she tried to divine him. Did he question her motives, in some way that she had considered? Or was he merely considerate and friendly? For a fluttering moment, even standing here in her own room, surrounded by a score of evidences that for the first time in its brief little life the baby was well cared for, Hilda felt herself an intruder. And he made her feel so, this prize-fighter. A little rush of resentment against him flared within her; and following this, something very like resentment against the woman who had brought this

little life into the world, and who might at any moment reassert her right in it. For already Hilda saw that she herself might grow too fond of the child. This wouldn't do, of course. It would bring problems greater than any she had yet faced. And, too, she must not feel too harshly toward that poor waif of a girl-mother in the hospital at Auteuil. Even if she was a pretty questionable sort of person! Even if the ideas of motherhood and marriage were inseparably linked in Hilda's mind!

She walked over to the window-sill and managed a pretense of setting something to rights. She turned back and bent over the basket, tucking the covers close in behind the little back. After all, in what respect was this very little girl different from other children! Was it fair to blame a child for the dereliction of its parents! She looked up at Moran, over the basket.

"I'll keep an account of the expense," she said, simply, with a softness in her voice so unfamiliar, even to herself, that her eyes unexpectedly filled—"and let you know."

"Thanks," said he. "I knew you would. I make it a rule to go to bed early. But if you need me, or if there's anything I can do, my room is number ten, just down the hall. Good night." And he was gone.

She went to bed herself then, but got little sleep. Shortly after midnight the baby woke, and became so restless that Hilda, dimming the electric light with wrappings of colored tissue-paper from her trunk, took it up and, settling herself in the armchair where Moran had sat, cuddled it to sleep in her arms. This sleep proved so deep and restful that she had not the heart to risk an awakening by replacing it in the basket. And she liked to feel the little body, wrapped about as it was in blanket and puff, a helpless weight in her arms. More than once, very gently, she

pressed it to her breast. She grew drowsy herself. Her thoughts rambled and took on the color of dreams. Her head drooped, then came up with a start and she looked about her at the unfamiliar room that was already so completely dominated by the baby. Baby's things everywhere —little garments that she herself had washed, drying over chair-backs! What an extraordinary man her prize-fighter was to step into this strange, this exceedingly intimate, atmosphere and take it for granted, just as it was. Yes, he was natural. That was the word. It was why he liked Paris—because he was natural. For Paris, with all its excesses, is at least that.

Her head drooped again. The baby was warm on her breast. Her arms relaxed a little. She brought herself awake with a deliberate effort of will. It would not do to fall asleep. Not with baby in her arms. It would be safer to put her back in the basket. So she did this. Then, realizing that she herself was cold, except for that delicious warmness where the baby had lain so close, she got into bed and added a steamer rug to the rather inadequate covering.

Again her sleep was short; but at least she had had the opportunity to get warm. This time she threw a heavy wrap about herself, and hurriedly set some water boiling over the lamp and got out her small drip coffee-pot. If this thing was to be a job, as it so evidently was, she would make a real job of it. Again she settled herself in the big chair and cuddled the little living thing close to her own warm body.

It was half past two by the traveling clock on the bureau. Before three o'clock she had made and drunk her coffee; and felt refreshed. The baby certainly was sleeping better, this night, in her arms. Very well, in her arms the baby should sleep.

At ten minutes after three she heard "the girls" come in. They said good night. One voice was Adele's. The other, she thought, was Millicent's. There was the sound of light footsteps and the rustle of skirts. Two doors closed softly.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, there were other soft sounds in the hall. A man's voice, this time—a man who was evidently intending to whisper and then forgetting the intention.

"No, I'm not drunk," he was saying. "Only a few drinks —tha's all. Jus' what those St. Louis men bought for me —part of a bottle of wine. An' then jus' a few other drinks. I'm comin' in."

The girl whispered her reply. But her voice, too, rose after a moment. Hilda heard her say—"Now, don't you go starting anything! Be careful, Will! Adele's in. She'll hear you!"

The voice was Blondie's. And the man, Hilda believed, was young Harper. At his next remark, she was certain.

"What do I care for her! I can manage her. She does everything I say. She ain't goin' to make trouble. I'm comin' in."

The girl whispered excitedly. Hilda thought she caught the sound of a small scuffle. Then another door opened, and Adele's voice said:

"Can't you see the lady's light's lighted? Do you want her to hear you? What do you suppose she'll think of us!"

It was a point of view that Hilda could not fathom at the moment. There was weariness in Adele's voice, but she could not tell if there was any great amount of emotion in it. While she was thinking about it the little disturbance quieted down, and doors closed.

Hilda sat quite motionless, holding the baby tight. That this atmosphere into which she had so impulsively intruded

was distinctly queer, that it savored of an easy demoralization foreign to her own instincts and to the routine of her life, she was now certain. It was the sort of thing that at home, in her own environment, fast to her own moorings, she could not tolerate; the sort of thing that irritated her, as inefficiency, any sort of a bad job, irritated her. But she was distinctly not fast to her own moorings. She wished she were. Even now it might be possible to take the steamer back with May Isbell. May would reach Paris in a few days.

For a time she considered this possibility. Then her reason stirred and told her, as it had told her before, that the one weakness she could not permit herself was irresolution. Deep, deep in her thoughts she knew that she could never go back to the store except as a changed rested woman. On no other terms could she face Joe Hemstead. He would be more than considerate. He would give her any reasonable amount of time at full salary—a year, even. But there was nothing personal or yielding about J. H. Himself a finely organized, efficient working machine, he looked at her in the same light. As a working machine she was now a little out of repair. She herself had admitted it. He knew it anyway, without her admission. She must be put into repair, at once. That was all. The Hartman store was not a junk shop—it was a great smooth-running power-house in which every wire, every casting, every bearing, every switch, every dynamo, was a human being or a finely organized group of human beings.

For the first time in Hilda Wilson's life this thought disturbed her, almost frightened her. And from this fact alone she knew that she couldn't go back. She couldn't go back, indeed, until the old feeling should return of glorying in her own part in the working of the great machine.

This was a matter of getting into sound physical condition, that was all. She told herself that that was all.

Her head ached. She looked about the room. There was her own wardrobe trunk, standing open, her own clothes hanging within it. There were her brush and comb and mirror and her silver box of toilet articles on the chiffonier. But all about were baby's things! And the room was a chamber in a queer little French hotel, in Paris. She looked up at the thick red curtains that hung suspended from gilded cornices, before the two long casement windows. She looked at the none-too-clean white paint on the door frame, and the heavily-flowered red paper on the wall. Struggling with the almost overpowering sense of unreality that had gripped her during these two abnormal days, she looked down at the baby in her arms. And suddenly her eyes filled. A tear slipped down on her cheek. She let it go. Here was something real, something she could hold to for the moment at least. For the moment . . .

She started, and sat erect—so suddenly that the baby stirred a little in her arms. She had caught a faint noise in the hall. She listened intently—and heard it again. For the moment she was frightened. But everything was still again. Perhaps she had imagined it. She sat, still erect, for a little time; then rose, moved carefully across the room, turned the key softly, and opened the door.

Outside, in her nightgown, Adele was leaning against the wall. She looked white and tired.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," she said, timidly. "I was just worrying a little, and thought I'd listen—"

"I was awake," said Hilda. She did not feel unkindness for the girl, but could not help speaking with a stiffness that was, in part, self-consciousness.

Adele bit her lip, then looked down at the little dark head

that was cuddled in the folds of the puff: "She's all right?"

Hilda nodded. "A little cold, that's all. The snuffles seem to interfere some with her breathing and wake her up. So I'm holding her. The colic seems to be a good deal better."

Adele hesitated, turned half away, then, with a whispered "Good night," slipped down the hall. Hilda closed the door.

VI

ON CERTAIN DIFFICULTIES IN THE WAY OF BEING NATURAL AND TRUTHFUL AT THE SAME TIME

AFTER two or three days it became evident that the baby was not strong enough to throw off her cold easily; the infection must run its course. And for Hilda the problem of devoting herself to the wavering little life and at the same time accounting for herself to her business acquaintances showed evidences of becoming acute.

She was determined not to give up the baby. Already the child, with its appeal to her deepest instinct (partly atrophied though this instinct may have been), and its helplessness, had found out and filled and warmed every hidden corner in her hitherto empty heart. She had told Moran that the baby was a job; she could not have told him or any one how much more than a job it was to her now. She prepared the food, washed out the little garments, bathed and powdered the thin body, with a devotion that was almost fiercely primitive. The others felt her strong sense of monopoly in the matter, but were so impressed by her ability and determination that they accepted the situation in a spirit of complete and ingenuous friendliness.

Moran was in and out, always quiet, always solid. Early each afternoon, following that confused first day, he insisted on taking her out for a walk, bringing her back in time to release Adele for her work at the Parnasse. Hilda

permitted this rather passively. The strain of listening, most of the day and all the night, for the heavy breathing of the baby through its inflamed nasal and bronchial passages, was telling on her; and she was glad to feel this strong person so calmly looking out for her health. That was what she liked best in Moran. He felt the same instinctive aversion from physical or nervous weakness that she felt from laziness or business inefficiency. And this influence was precisely what she needed now. They walked along the Champs Elysées, out to the Arc de Triomphe, through the Avenue Kléber to the Trocadéro, and back by way of the Quai to the Place de la Concorde, the Rue Royale, and the Madeleine. She liked the view of river, Eiffel Tower and the Champ-de-Mars from the porches of the Trocadéro; and she liked, too, the quiet reaches of the Seine, with its fine bridges springing so lightly from pier to pier, its solidly restful masonry embankment, and the absurd little passenger steamers, covered with advertisements, that darted impertinently up-stream and down.

She found that Moran was watching her diet, too; and, rather to her own surprise, did not resent the fact. Probably because there was nothing of the unpleasantly personal in his attitude. It was like having an expert physical trainer at one's elbow every day. In fact, it was just that. And now and then, when her mind wandered momentarily from the baby and herself, she fell to thinking that the men at the store who employed physical trainers to keep them fit (as Joe Hemstead did, year in and year out) had no such expert advice as was now being quietly pressed on her. She even jotted down some of his comments regarding diet and the mild sorts of exercise that a woman could properly undertake, for reference later on when this baby problem should be off her hands.

Adele helped all she could; but her late night work made it necessary for her to sleep during the greater part of the mornings.

Hilda was not comfortably certain that she approved of Adele. So strong was this feeling that she made it a point not to learn too much of her relations with that erratic youth, her "partner." She never went to Adele's room, because she feared the confirmation of her guess that it was also Harper's room. Then, too, the disturbance, of which she had caught a few echoes during her first night with the baby, appeared to be gathering head. Hilda felt that a situation at once unpleasant and quite beyond her own control was likely to be discovered any day. It was a situation in which she herself might very easily become involved. She did not like to think about it.

Indeed, the slightly confusing fact was that Hilda could not help liking Adele, in spite of all the evidence against her. The girl might have been, evidently had been, caught in one of the rough and swirling undercurrents of life; but she was not "bad"—not with those straightforward cow eyes and that gentleness of manner not untouched with shyness, that always disarmed one—not "bad" in the sense that the flippant, often impertinent Annie Haggerty was bad, even though she might be guilty of the same offense. . . . Hilda found this line of thought rather bewildering. Sin must be sin, of course. But Annie had a distinct touch of the adventurous in her. Adele had none, apparently; one felt that, despite her natural grace and distinction on the dancing floor, she ought to have a home, and babies, and sewing and cooking to do. One felt that she would be content; and content with almost any fairly sober, fairly kind man for a husband. And yet, the adventurous quality is not necessarily sinful, in itself. . . . Hilda gave it up.

On the third morning Hilda took a step which she saw plainly had to be taken. She rode down to the Armandeville offices. Deliberately avoiding the gallant head of the house, she sought out M. Levy, the experienced Jewish employee who had for years accompanied her on her buying expeditions as translator and business agent; and set herself at the task of apparently bidding him a casually friendly farewell while really endeavoring to fix in his mind a satisfactory explanation of her distinctly irregular movements. M. Levy was discreet. He did not share with his chief the privilege of making personal advances to visiting lady buyers. He was too closely associated with them in their intricate day-by-day transactions to permit of his intruding the slightest feeling into his relationships with them. This, despite the fact that he was often obliged to lunch and dine with them, to accompany them to opera and races and on occasional sightseeing expeditions. Hilda, of recent years, after her experience with all sorts of men in France, Germany, England and America, had wondered often at his self-control. She had even wondered where and when he pursued the amours so important in the life of every Parisian she had ever known or heard of. Sometimes, so busy was he, it seemed that you could account for all his waking time. Yet always he was smiling and blondly urbane, always patient, always impersonal; never in a hurry to be off about his own affairs. Thus he maintained among the flocks of lady buyers, the good will of Armandeville et Cie., which had been not infrequently jeopardized by the exigent susceptibilities of old M. Armandeville himself. And so it was that Hilda—outwardly cool, if a thought pale and tired; but inwardly blazing with resentment that the thing should be necessary at all—passing M. Levy's desk as if it was the most natural thing in the world that

she should be there, greeted him cordially, and accepted the chair he offered.

"You have been away?" said he, all smiles.

Hilda thought quickly. They must have been trying to find her at the big hotel on the Rue de Rivoli. So she nodded, then guarded the nod with the statement—"Not out of Paris, but with friends."

Her thoughts raced on and on, around and ahead of the present situation. It was going to be difficult. That miserably unstable thing, her reputation, would crash right here, were she not exceedingly skilful in creating a plausible impression. The one thing above all others that she could not tell, was the truth. It had come to lying—no doubt of that, now. Downright wretched lying. So much had a warm impulse done for her on an empty rudderless day. No use even considering the matter now. And yet the truth was beautiful—the most beautiful experience in her barren life. She was doing a natural thing, a human thing, an essentially decent and fine thing. And she had to cover it up—lie about it.

For one deep moment a great uprush of anger swayed within her. And she sat calmly there, smiling a little, and idly fingering a corner of the green desk blotter. She was as beautiful as ever, M. Levy thought, studying her through mild eyes. A fine woman—a driver; and with a good business head! Some of the others were cats. He wondered how she managed to look so young. Possibly she really was young. Who could say? At that, however, she did look tired.

"You have worked hard," he observed.

She nodded. "I'm going to take a vacation," said she—"the first regular vacation in years."

"Ah—splendid! You will remain on this side?"

She nodded again. "For the present—traveling a bit with friends. It will be nice to be a human being for a month or so."

M. Levy sighed. "It is always nice to be a human being."

"Yes. I will send you a memorandum about the March shipments. We have covered everything else, I think."

"Everything. You are not to concern yourself. I will attend to it all."

"Thank you. I shall have to leave it in your hands, anyway. For I am dropping all work." She sobered.

"Of course," he replied. "One can rest in no other way."

"If any letters should come here, forward them through the American Express. I am leaving my hotel, of course."

He noted this down.

They chatted a few moments longer. Then she rose to go.

"By the way," said he, "your Mr. Aitcheson is in Paris."

Hilda stood there by his desk, silent for a flash. She was smiling again—a cool self-possessed woman. A woman with a good business head!

"He was inquiring for you yesterday. I think he tried to find you at your hotel."

So it was Stanley who had been looking for her. She wished now that she had not given this man her forwarding address. But she could not recall it. Above all, she must display no feeling against Stanley. She could only let it go.

She had to move on now, anyway; for May Isbell was arriving at eleven-thirty from the South. She must meet May, take her to luncheon, and pack her off for Calais at three. She had planned this with considerable care, telegraphing May just what trains she was to take. The arrangement spared her from spending with her assistant a

night that would involve more or less close personal confidences and explanations. She could not even have explained the absence of her trunk from her room at the big hotel on the Rue de Rivoli. May knew every detail of her baggage and wardrobe, and besides had the sort of feminine mind that keeps all such details straight. Further than this, she had to get back to the baby shortly after three in order that Adele could dress and go to the Parnasse.

The few hours with her assistant proved less difficult than she had feared. May was suspended between a fresh enthusiasm over the costumes she had seen on the Riviera and a startled concern over the heavy responsibility that confronted her in returning alone. Hilda took her to the Café de Paris and, until time to leave for the train, kept her mind occupied with detailed instructions for the spring display. Not until the last ten minutes at the Gare du Nord did May's thoughts center on the rather curious problem of Hilda Wilson.

"But what on earth are you going to do, over here alone?" she asked.

Hilda smiled wearily. "I have a chance to travel a little —with some friends. I've always wanted to."

A faint cloud flitted across May Isbell's not over subtle face. But Hilda's smile did not waver.

"Well," said May then, "I suppose I'd better get to my seat before some Englishman takes it. Good-by. Do take care of yourself and have a good rest. And don't worry about us at the store. I'm sure everything will be all right."

"Oh, yes," said Hilda, quietly and with a touch of firmness, "you will manage all right. It will be a good experience for you."

May was silent for a little. Hilda was her chief—there

could be no reply. Then, with a moment's hesitation, she said:

"I'm sorry you're not coming back with me, though. I was looking forward to the trip."

"It isn't pleasant traveling alone. But we have to do it, now and then. You'll meet people. And it's always rather friendly on those slower English ships."

"I suppose so," mused May. She was on the car step now, but still lingered. "You hadn't thought of going back and taking your rest on the other side?" she asked.

Hilda gave a firm little shake to her head. "There's nothing in that," she replied. "It wouldn't be rest."

She added no explanations, though much was passing through her mind. Were she to be anywhere within traveling distance of the store it would be impossible for her to keep away from her desk. She knew that. To join her mother at home would be to slip back among tangled little problems which would fray still more her worn nerves. And to travel south, or out to California, and sit, a solitary tourist, on hotel verandas, would drive her mad. What she must have was companionship and fresh work. She compressed her lips, though her eyes were still smiling at her assistant. For despite the trying nature of her present situation, it brought relief to reflect that she had both the companionship and the work. It was difficult, and it was queer; but she had these.

They gripped hands firmly; and Hilda turned briskly away.

May Isbell, entering her compartment and dropping into her seat by the window, looked after the alert figure of Hilda until she lost it in the crowd by the concourse gate. It was curious, rather, that Hilda had never mentioned these friends with whom she now purposed touring Europe.

For she and Hilda had been close traveling companions; and had talked freely, unguardedly at times, as traveling companions will.

Hilda hesitated a moment with one foot on the taxi step. She had thought of driving around by way of the American Express and calling for her mail. But Levy would be giving this address to Stanley Aitcheson. That was certain. Still, even the temperamental Stanley would hardly spend whole days there on the chance that she might appear. No, he would write her there. He was always writing, anyway. When in doubt, in elation, in temper or in love, he always seized upon his pen. It was a curious trait; one that she found it peculiarly difficult to understand.

"Numero onze, Rue Scribe," she said, in her honestly American accent, and entered the taxi. She would go there anyway. She was tired of being furtive. For the moment she did not care whether she encountered Stanley or not. Though her reason told her that the chance was too remote for serious consideration.

VII

HILDA FEELS THAT SHE HAS DISPOSED OF STANLEY AITCHESON. MORAN TALKS WITH THE MANAGERS OF A PERSON OF IMPORTANCE. AND WILL HARPER GOES TO BUDAPEST

THE cab stopped at the curb, across from the Opéra. Hilda hurried into the Express Company's building and directly to the winding double stairway that led to the mail and reading room above. Still deep within herself, her constant thought of the baby clouded at moments by surges of that spirit of rebellion against the confusing pressures about her, she gave not even a curious glance to the Americans at the various grated windows cashing traveler's checks, studying out circular tours and buying tickets, or chatting in groups near the door—she simply brushed by and ascended the stairs with nervously quick feet.

As she neared the top, a young man emerged from the mail room and stepped aside as if to descend the other stairway. Then suddenly he stopped short and fairly leaped back. Hilda looked up, and stood motionless, one foot on the top step, her hand gripping the rail. For an instant she could not bring her faculties clear.

Then, pale and sober, an expression of guardedly unsmiling recognition on her face she extended her hand.

He gripped it hard. "Oh," he said, low, "thank God . . . I left a note. I was afraid I had missed you."

"I am going in for my mail now," she said, conveying nothing; and he moved on into the big room with her.

Stanley Aitcheson was a good-looking young man, with something of the artist's softness of outline in his face and of the artist's fire in his brown eyes—all this above a pair of athletic shoulders and a long, nervously alert body.

Hilda went straight to the "M to Z" window and took her place in the line. All of five minutes passed before she turned away, letters in hand: there had been time to think. She walked slowly toward a writing table, opening an envelope. The table she had deliberately chosen was close to others where other Americans sat writing or talking. She was giving Stanley no chance. It simply would not do to give him a chance. She had watched him as he stood by one of the long outer windows, staring down into the street, biting his lip and switching the light stick he carried against his leg.

He came over now and dropped into the chair at the other side of the table. He laid his stick across the desk blotter, stared gloomily at it for a moment, then put his hat on it, looked up, and smiled nervously.

Hilda was swiftly opening her other letters, throwing the envelopes into the waste basket one by one and arranging the enclosures in a neat pile. Aitcheson, biting his lip again, glanced covertly at the next table, and about at their other close neighbors. Hilda wondered if he had been drinking a little. He did that sometimes, she knew. But then, most men did.

He leaned forward, elbows on table.

"Can't we have a little talk?" he said, his voice low and not quite steady.

Hilda placed her two hands on the little heap of papers, raised her eyes, and looked steadily at him for a moment.

"I haven't much time to-day, Stanley."

He bit his lip. "How about to-morrow, then?" He spoke as one who is determined to remain calm.

She thought this over. "I really shan't have much time for a few days."

He flashed a glance of genuine surprise at her. "But Levy just told me to-day that you've quit work."

"I have never accounted to Mr. Levy for my time."

"But—but—" His voice was rising a little. Despite her resolution to handle this situation without any show of personal concern, Hilda could not resist glancing about her. They must not be overheard.

"Look here," said he. "I've come all the way from New York to Paris just to talk with you. Do you think you're being quite fair with me?"

Hilda mused. Perhaps it would be better to talk the thing clear out and have it over with. She dreaded the thought. It made her head ache. It was just another of those insistent pressures that were wearing her out. Certainly she could not sit here and quarrel with an excited boy. It was plain that evasion on her part merely stirred and embittered him. Delay would doubtless have the same effect.

"Very well," she replied, looking straight at him. "I really haven't the time now, but I'll take it."

"We can't say anything here," said he.

She agreed to this; and added, "The Café de la Paix is just down the block. We can sit there and talk quietly."

So, in silence, they crossed the street and walked over to the corner of the boulevard. Only a few early tea drinkers were in the restaurant. Aitcheson led her to the farthest corner, and in response to her nod ordered tea and toast.

"Now," she said, "I've brought you here with a purpose.

It was quite true that we couldn't talk there at the American Express. And we can't talk here, Stanley—not along the lines of your last letter. I must say that in some way that I am sure you will understand. This is to be the last time you and I ever discuss the subject. I don't feel toward you as you say you feel toward me. It is pretty certain that I never shall. You said it was unfair of me to refuse to talk with you after you have traveled so far to see me. Has it occurred to you that it was not fair of you to come? I never encouraged such a thing. I have never encouraged you, except in a friendly way. You are annoying me now —disturbing me. You have no right to do it. My advice is that you take the next ship back, go straight to your desk, stop thinking about yourself, and try to make good at your job."

After saying which, she sat quietly there, her hands clasped against the table edge, her lips compressed, her eyes flashing a little, looking straight at him.

She could see that he was stunned by this broadside. He flushed, and dropped his eyes; and more than once raised them with a fluttering question. He had sunk back in his chair, his hands plunged into his coat pockets. Gradually he whitened about the mouth; and made a curiously unsuccessful little effort to smile. When he did speak, it was with a reversion to the slang of his boyhood, even now not so remote.

"Gee!" he breathed. "That sounds rather final."

"It *is* final," said Hilda.

Again he tried to smile at her; but, failing, turned his head and gazed out through the window curtains at the empty, wind-swept sidewalk tables and the pedestrians and street traffic beyond them.

Hilda watched him, and pondered. After all, the boy

had come clear across the ocean to find her; or at least to find a response to the turbulent emotions within himself. Even granting that his imagination had as much to do with this erratic adventure as any devotion for a particular person, there was something rather appealing in the thought of it. Having struck him so solidly with her verbal bludgeon, she now found herself softening. She had seen other men in this condition; and even when they were most completely sunk in their egotistic self-pity, they had stirred her—always to her own surprise. This boy was stirring her now—again to her surprise. She wondered how it would be to feel like that. Then an unexpected gust blew up disconcertingly from the deepest caverns of memory and fanned a little flickering blaze in her heart. She *had* once felt like that . . . years ago.

In his last letter, the one she had been unable to answer, Stanley had called her hard. She wondered, with a momentary tightening of the nerves, if it could be true. Toward him, of course, she must continue to appear hard. There was no escaping that. It was out of the question that she should surrender her life into the hands of this inexperienced boy, whom she hardly knew. Quite out of the question. She knew—had realized for a year or more, in her occasional dwellings on the problem—that the time had definitely passed when it would be possible for her to cast in her lot with a struggling young man and help him make his way against the currents of life. Once she could have done this; but now too much had happened. Her life had widened and, in a measure, richened. Her abilities had grown.

"Well," he was saying—"I guess that ends it all."

He did not meet her glance of inquiry. "What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"It's over. I'm through. There's nothing left for me."

"Don't be tragic, Stanley."

He looked at her now. "Is that all?" he asked huskily. "You just look at me, cold and hard as nails, and tell me not to be tragic?"

It seemed to her that he was indulging his emotions to the point of working up a scene. But she did not blame him. He was the sort that lives always in one or another emotional storm.

She leaned forward on the table, and looked at him—kindly, even gently.

"Perhaps I understand better than you think, Stanley," she said. He brightened a little at the change in her. "I don't believe you are in love with me. No, please don't shake your head. And please make an effort to catch what I am saying. It is true that we can't go on talking about this. I can not go on having violent scenes with you and reading violent letters. It would simply wear me out without in any way making you happier. Indeed, you would lose ground by it, for you have at least had my cordial friendship . . . Now, please listen. You are not in love with me. You actually don't know me—yes, that does make a difference. But you are in a state of mind that is dangerous to yourself and others. You are not a man who should live alone. The thing you really do need, Stanley, is the companionship of a woman. Not my kind, somebody simpler and younger. You ought to marry, Stanley."

"You don't mean," said he, slowly, after a long silence, "that you think I could turn my affections toward any one!"

She was silent.

"Where are your ideals?" he went on. His voice was low and uneven. "At least I supposed you would know that love is a high and beautiful thing."

She suppressed a momentary impatience. She must see this situation through. The boy appeared to be a quivering mass of youthful illusions.

"You evidently don't know what love is," he added.

She clasped her hands and rested them on the table-cloth. She could not reply to this.

"You have never suffered," said he.

The reproach in his voice fanned her inner blaze high and higher, until it roared at the ears of her mind. Her clasped hands tightened. She looked straight at him, and a mask dropped from her face.

"There you are wrong, Stanley." At the sudden low vibrancy in her voice, he shifted his position and shot a puzzled glance at her. This was the voice of a woman he had never known. But she seemed to brush this glance aside as, roused now, she swept on. "I *have* suffered. I have suffered because I do know what love is. I loved a man, and I had to send him away."

"Oh," he murmured, "you sent him away, too."

"Don't, Stanley—please!" she said. He had never seen her eyes flash like this. He had never seen her so beautiful and so human. She continued. "I had to. He was married. And there were children. But I loved him. And I think he loved me—then."

She sank back in her chair, still looking straight at him; and the fire slowly died in her eyes. "There, Stanley," she concluded, more gently—"I have told you more than I ever told another living being. But if it helps you to understand me, I shall not be sorry. I do not like to hurt you, and yet I must stop you from pursuing me in this way."

Her eyes were swimming; but he did not look up just then.

"Was it some one you worked with?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "But I think you had better not ask questions, Stanley. It was a long time ago. He was a big man—the biggest I have ever known. He helped me. I gave him loyalty up to the time when it became a question of giving love. Then we had to break. He was bitter. He could not see what was so plain to me, even then—that in these affairs the wife always wins. It seemed to me that she was a selfish woman. Perhaps I was not fair to her; but it seemed so to me then. And during those years I know that she was not the helpmate to him that I was. I worked and fought with him in his deepest struggles and difficulties. He is successful now. But I worked through those years by his side. I never see him."

Aitcheson was gazing down at the table-cloth, where his fingers absently and slowly traced the flower pattern in the fabric. She leaned forward again, elbows on table, hands clasped.

"You told me I was hard, Stanley." He shifted uneasily, but she swept along. "Well—I'm afraid it is true. Yes, probably I am hard. All these years—and I am older than you—I have been at the job of building up a new and solitary life. And what have I found? Every man friend—every man I thought big and honest enough to be a friend, these recent years—has ended by trying to make love to me, by showing the beast in him—"

She shuddered slightly. Aitcheson observed, "Perhaps you are judging them too harshly;" but apparently without reaching her ear. "One by one," she continued, "I've had to let my men friends go. It wasn't possible. And their wives never would receive me. Among the wives there is always—always—that suspicion of a woman who lives an

independent business life. Unless she is old. Or a hag. Everywhere I turn, always, there is nothing but pressure and suspicion. So I've driven myself to work harder and harder. But look at the cost! I'm wearing out—at thirty-two. . . . Do you wonder I'm hard? Do you wonder I can't talk with you about love? No, Stanley, I'm not for you. But if you do feel gently toward me, you can help me by letting me alone. That's what I need."

Round and round the flower pattern went Stanley's finger. His eyes followed it intently.

But finally he looked up. "When you put it that way," he said, unsteadily, "it seems as if I ought to be able to do that. But I'm with you now. And we're talking real things. The trouble will come after I leave you—to-morrow, maybe. I shall want to see you. And those bitter feelings will come."

"Don't be bitter, Stanley," said she, gently. "I've been. And it doesn't help. That's just my fight—to keep from being bitter. You'd better fight it, too."

She was drawing on her gloves.

"I know," said he, "but I get so bewildered."

A middle-aged couple, Americans, entered the restaurant, followed by a fresh young girl—an extremely pretty girl.

Stanley caught sight of them first in the mirror behind Hilda. Then he turned. Hilda saw a momentary flush mount his cheek. The woman bowed—then the girl. The man, at his wife's word, smiled and waved a friendly hand.

Stanley excused himself and joined them. They received him cordially; but Hilda saw and felt the mother shoot a questioning glance in her direction.

In a few moments he was back. "Some people I met on

the steamer," he explained. "Name of Macy. From Philadelphia."

Hilda had her gloves on now. "I must go, Stanley," she said.

"Let me take you back to your hotel," he suggested.

She smiled, and shook her head. "You and I have got to part—until there is some sort of a change and we can be friends. We may as well part here."

He accompanied her to the sidewalk and hailed a taxi for her. She was conscious of a momentary elation. It seemed to her that she had handled the situation with something of her old power. But when the chauffeur leaned forward for the address, and again the necessity for concealment came to her, her smile faded and her mouth set itself firmly.

"I have an errand or two," she said briskly. "I'll walk."

She pressed Stanley's hand, with cordiality enough, and hurried away, leaving him there.

As she walked, the resentment was high again. She wasted little thought on Stanley. He was an emotional young genius, and this was his mating time. Love is not always personal. And, besides, the man's freedom was his. Her thoughts turned—as she walked along the boulevard past the Parnasse and turned off behind the shadowy mass of the Madeleine—toward the quiet solid Moran. His talk about the worker bees flashed back to her surface thoughts with unexpected vividness. They were the females, those workers. "Mostly they work every day, until they die," he had said. "That's all they do, just work." And then, "Sometimes they seem to go sort of crazy." At which she had said to herself, "I should think they would." That would be when there was little honey to be got in the

fields—when all the sweet early flowers had died. They become demoralized. They get "honey drunk." They even take to robbing other hives.

This thought brought swift vivid pictures of the baby. By the watch on her wrist it was nearly five o'clock. She walked more rapidly.

She was surprised to find Adele in her room. When she opened the door, the girl was seated by the baby's basket, her arm over the back of the chair, her face pillowed on it. She looked up, startled, as Hilda came in; then sprang to her feet and rushed out past her without a word, without even closing the door. She had been weeping.

There was no explanation until Moran appeared in the early evening.

"I wanted to see you," he said. "But I had to have dinner with Carpentier's people. There was some rather important business."

She thought him even graver than usual. "Is it—is it about . . ."

"They're talking a match, yes," said he.

"It isn't settled?"

"No. I don't much think they'll do it. But some of the papers have had a good deal to say, and I suppose his managers think they have to consider it. They've been accusing him of picking the easy ones, and they say he ought to meet me. It all depends on how strong the papers keep at him. There's an English weekly, friends of mine, that is hammering pretty hard. You see, he thinks more of his reputation than some of our American men do. He's a decent fellow, Carpentier."

He hung his hat on the nearest bed-post and for a moment stood looking down at the baby, now asleep.

"Sit down," said Hilda. "I want to ask about Adele."

"Did you see her?"

"Yes, but she wouldn't speak. She had been crying. And it was five o'clock. Why didn't she go to the Parnasse?"

Moran drew up a chair and seated himself. He crossed his legs, and clasped his knee in his strong hands. He was very grave indeed. It seemed to her that he was perhaps something embarrassed.

"Will Harper has gone to Budapest," he finally said. "Skipped. With Blondie. He's got a job there."

"Oh!" Hilda drew in her breath. "But what becomes of Adele?"

This question appeared to relieve his mind. "That's just it," he replied. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about—only I couldn't be sure you'd be interested."

VIII

MAN THROUGH A WOMAN'S EYES. AND HOW EVEN BITTERNESS MAY HAVE ITS USES

HILDA cautioned him to lower his voice. The baby was breathing hoarsely, and coughing a good deal in its weak little way.

"I think I can get them to keep Adele on at the Parnasse for the '*thé* tango' work," he explained. "See the manager about it in the morning. But they won't pay much of anything for that. Girls are cheap in Paris. And she can't go on at night in the review without her partner. The 'Twisters' were a special troupe, you know; and broken up this way, with young Harper gone, it's all off. Etheridge and Gay may stay on, or they may have to pick up something else. But it leaves Adele flat, any way you look at it."

Hilda considered. She felt like two persons. On the surface she was weighing this matter of Adele's immediate future from a practical standpoint. Back of these thoughts her mind was racing up new avenues of speculation. "There's nothing else she can do?"

He shook his head. "She isn't good enough to do a turn alone," he said, reflecting. "Adele's easy-going, you know. Harper is a good dancer, and she kept right up with him. But she hasn't got ambition enough. That's her trouble. She stays where you put her. She has to be led by somebody."

Hilda looked at him, straighter than she knew; and pressed a meditative finger against her mouth.

"See here," she said. "Something's got to be done, hasn't it?"

"Why," he replied, with irritating calmness, "I suppose so. It'll go sort of rough with the kid if we don't do something."

Hilda was still intent. "Tell me this. I want to know. Were she and that boy—well, lovers?"

"I don't know." His evasion was quietly perfect. Perhaps it was not consciously an evasion. "I don't think she loved him. But she'd be steady, just the same. She's the steady kind. Of course it has upset her, being thrown out of her work like this, and so far away from home . . ."

"I understand all that," Hilda broke in crisply. "You've got something in your mind—some plan. What is it?"

He was slow to reply. He seemed to be thinking it all out; that he was deliberately keeping her waiting concerned him not at all.

"Yes," he said, at last, "I have an idea about it."

"What is it?"

"Well, you see, Adele's not like the others. Once I offered her some money—the time Harper blew her pay and his in a gyp gambling place at Montmartre—and she wouldn't take it. I couldn't make her. And she likes me, too."

"Yes," observed Hilda, "she likes you."

"Then, you see, all this baby business is going to run into money. And Adele knows that. She has talked to me about it. So I thought I'd try putting it up to you this way. You could offer to take her in—might take the next room here for her. It's empty now. She'll have more time now, and she could help you. You could say it was

a loan. And then I could pay you, and we'd say nothing to her about that part of it."

Hilda knit her brows. But he finished what he had to say, apparently with perfect faith that she would not fail to cooperate fully with him. She covertly watched him. She felt suddenly and curiously afraid of him; which, she told herself, was silly. He was, in his way, irresistible. He moved slowly and deliberately over your own ideas like—she almost indulged in a sudden smile—like the steam roller of recent political analogy back home. She thought again of the immense vitality and reserve power in that strong frame; and again came the tense nervous thought that she would like to see him in action in the ring—a gloriously beautiful figure of a man in short trunks and canvas shoes, all shining skin and hard muscle, tearing like a tiger at his opponent. What if he *should* fight Carpentier!

"Or if that doesn't appeal to you," he was concluding, "suppose we, you and I, just lump the whole expense of Adele and the baby together and divide it between us."

Hilda was finding difficulties in the way of thinking this little matter out clearly. She was being swept along faster than before. These new influences in her life—the baby, and Moran, for he was distinctly an influence now—were like an undertow sweeping her soul out to deep water. She could still cut loose. She had been clinging to that thought. But if she permitted herself to drift much deeper into this queer situation, that little matter of cutting loose might prove very difficult indeed. At any moment she might find herself identified with these people in some irrevocable way. What if Stanley Aitcheson should have a brainstorm and trail her to these odd haunts, finding her involved with chorus girls, a prize-fighter and a baby! At this something

tightened within her, and her thoughts raced. Before this, American women had dropped out of sight for a time in France or Italy; and there had been whispers of a child here or there. Her heart seemed to pause. . . . Stanley was not discreet; he might talk with Levy. And she had let May Isbell start on the journey home with an unanswered question in her eyes . . . The complete other side of the curious picture in which she was a figure was now spread clear and wide before her startled vision; and what she saw and imagined there paralyzed her judgment.

There was another factor in the situation that she felt vaguely; but simply could not face. This Blink Moran was quite impossible, except as a picturesquely casual acquaintance. But there he was, drawing closer and closer in that quietly irresistible way of his. And he made her think of warm wonderful experiences that stirred and startled her imagination. The influence of the baby entered here—it had set a warm current moving in her heart, it had weakened the inner defenses that she had for years thought strong enough to resist anything.

There was the one safe course—to cut loose, go to the Riviera, to Italy, fill her mind with fresh impressions and the pleasant experiences of irresponsible travel. . . . She looked down at the flushed restless infant. To Moran she appeared sober, calm.

"I think she must have some fever," said Hilda. "And she is coughing more often. Listen! . . . There, it's a shorter, harder cough. And two or three times she has twisted her face up as if it was hard to get her breath."

Moran drew his chair closer, and stared down into the basket.

"We'd better have the doctor in again, I think," she said.

"All right," said he. "I'll send the boy."

Hilda was thinking on. It seemed to her the moment at which a very important decision must be made, perhaps the most important decision of her life. To desert this baby now, after she had voluntarily assumed so much responsibility in the matter, would appear as an incredibly capricious and selfish act. Yet, by staying here, was she perhaps deserting the main channel of her own life—and that in a manner that might well affect her reputation, her livelihood, and the welfare of her mother and Margie and Harry?

And all this because he had asked her to take one small step further! Little he suspected that she was all but overlooking Adele's predicament in the intensity of her own!

She looked at him with veiled eyes in a composed face. She felt him; he sitting quietly over there, she sitting here. The room was full of him just then—full of his strength and vibrant health.

He did not look up.

She drew in a long breath. He appeared to feel nothing of the personal in this situation; he was studying the flushed little face in the basket.

She glanced down at the watch on her wrist; then rose. It was rather late.

"There is one very important thing I simply must do tonight," she said.

He raised his eyes. "Are you going out?"

She slowly nodded. "I've got to go over to the other hotel." She shut her lips on the impulsive explanations that seemed determined to follow. "You send for the doctor. And if there is any delay in getting him, you and Adele had better start the croup kettle going. Take a

sheet off the bed, and put it over the basket and these two chairs. That will keep the vapor in. Adele knows how to do it."

She paused, thinking swiftly. One of two things it had come to now: either she was leaving this room for the last time, and would send a maid back to pack her trunk; or else she would give up her rooms at the big hotel on the Rue de Rivoli and come back here to see it through and take the consequences. Somehow this latter seemed to her the braver, as it was the kindlier and more natural thing. "I wonder," she thought, in a flash, "if we women who guard our reputations so desperately aren't just cowards, really!" But she knew, too, that all her thinking now was colored by the situation. To see it at all clearly, she must get outside, in the air, away from all this; and away, clear away, from this big man whose personality so unreasonably filled the room.

She put on her long coat and hat, and picked up her furs.

She felt him looking at her.

"Will you need me?" he asked.

She shook her head, and extended her hand.

He expressed no surprise at this; merely rose and clasped it.

"You'll send right away for the doctor?" said she.

"Yes," said he.

"I'll talk with you later about Adele."

She went out and down the stairs. At the corner of the street she hailed a cruising taxi; then changed her mind and waved it on. "I'll walk," she decided.

The night air had a fine sting in it. She walked fast, with a sense of freedom. It seemed to her that she was emerging from a dream. She would sleep that night at

the hotel on the Rue de Rivoli. To-morrow she would leave for Monte Carlo, Nice, Mentone—then on to Florence, Milan, Venice. There would be the inevitable difficulties attendant on the woman traveling alone. People would wonder, and talk. Gossip would drift back home. But—and her thoughts hardened—gossip was already drifting back home, as it was. That was as good as certain. She was really helpless in the matter. She assured herself that it didn't matter any more. The thing to do was to strike out and get what simple honest enjoyment she could. Men would be beasts, always; and women would be cats. What one needed was to build up an independent inner life, go one's own way.

She walked around behind the Madeleine, hardly seeing it. She crossed the boulevard and the Rue Royale, dodging from one isle of safety to another. She moved briskly, along the west side of the Rue Royale toward the Place de la Concorde, past famous night restaurants and *tavernes*. A man spoke to her—an American, she thought—in bad French and a furtively wheedling voice. Her spirit bridled with contempt. He pressed. For a moment he walked at her side, bending over and laboriously building up insinuating sentences in the unfamiliar tongue. *"Allez!"* she said, looking him in the eye—*"Allez!"* Strangely, he accepted this, and turned away, a crestfallen male.

As she neared the last corner the bright lights of Maxim's came into view. A motor or two stood at the curb. A taxi was drawing up. A pasty-faced little chasseur in blue uniform and leather puttees was hastening out to the curb. She caught strains of music, and, faintly, the shrill laughter of bought love.

A man stepped awkwardly out of the taxi, knocking off

his top hat as he came. The chasseur bounded after the hat, smoothed it with an obsequious elbow, returned it. The man put it on and laughed. He was unsteady on his feet.

Hilda stopped short—stepped back. The man's head and back were familiar. She moved into a shop doorway.

A woman followed the man. There was no mistaking her type—a handsomely gowned, hard-faced woman of the restaurants.

Hilda was turning cold.

The man was Stanley Aitcheson.

She stood motionless there while he seized the woman's arm and awkwardly guided her in through the revolving door. The woman was laughing loudly. As he crushed after her into the door-compartment, he laughed, too.

They disappeared from sound and view. The taxi rattled away. But Hilda remained motionless there within the shadows of the shuttered door.

On this very day that man—yes, if younger than she, still he was a man and not a boy—on this very day he had told her of his love for herself. He had come three thousand miles to tell her that! She felt very cold and hard. It was unbelievable. Yet it was so.

She left the doorway and walked slowly on toward the myriad soft lights of the Place de la Concorde. Her hotel was only a few blocks away—to the left, past the Gardens of the Tuileries. She would soon be there.

So men were like that!

But it was nonsense for a woman of her experience to accept this as in any way a fresh thought. Of course they were like that. Not all of them perhaps—but many. There was young Will Harper. On this same day he had cast poor little Adele before these Paris wolves and fled with another. A sudden warm feeling for Adele surged

up in her heart. Within the hour she had been asked to help that child, and had hardly responded at all. For she had been thinking of herself—she saw this now. Yet she and Adele had this deep feeling in common, this bitter, bitter sense of injury at the hands of men. Even though Hilda's own experience had been so different.

She had been asked to help Adele; and this very suggestion, with its implication of further responsibility, deeper entanglements, had made her stop and think, had driven her away.

Yes, men were like that. But were they? Other pictures rose in her mind. It was confusing. Her head was aching again. Moran was not like that. He was back there now, in her own room, with her own most intimate possessions all about him, watching over that helpless baby. She could see him stripping a sheet off her own bed, and arranging it like a tent over the basket. She could see him on his knees, working over the croup kettle that was to fill the little tent with fumes that would soothe and heal the baby's inflamed membranes. The tears welled up in her eyes. She was walking very slowly now.

A wild thought flashed on her. How could she know that this was not Moran's own child? Was she being victimized by this easy-going crew?

Then she shook her head. This was not so. Moran was honest. They could not deceive her to that extent. She had worked too long, with all sorts. No, they couldn't fool her like that.

She stopped at the end of the street, and gazed through the lights toward the masses of shadow where the Champs Elysées begins in its wide grove of trees that were bare now.

Were men like that? Her reason said yes. But Moran was not. Neither was a certain other man, a big man, the

only one she had ever loved. He had been unreasonable at times, even bitter—as she had been herself. But he had never hurt her in the ugly way that Stanley Aitcheson had hurt her to-night. Never like that!

She turned eastward, toward the big hotel that for so many wearisome years had placed its stamp of business respectability on her. But her feet were heavy. She found herself dreading it. And yet, knowing herself, she knew that the other decision, a return to the baby and Moran and Adele, would be final with her. She wouldn't falter again. If she should decide to go back and resume those queer yet heavy burdens, she would, as she now put it to herself, "stick." If she were to strike hands with those people, they could count on her to see the little situation through.

Her thoughts cleared now. She stopped again, and stood on the curb. Another man addressed her, a Frenchman with a long beard. He even took her arm. But she simply shook him off. And he, like the other, accepted his dismissal. . . . She balanced up the situation. There was that serious danger that she would grow too fond of the baby. Every day of devoted care would make it harder to give her up. But she might have to accept this, at any time. On the other hand—and fluttering thoughts arose—perhaps she could keep her. There might be a way. It wasn't fair to cheat a woman out of her dearest, deepest natural function. There would be difficulties, of course. But even these might be managed. In a business way she had put through propositions that were very nearly as delicate and complicated—and not once, but many times. Perhaps the mother would be glad to place her well. This, too, was often done. But then she shrugged this all off. It needn't be settled. She could let all that side of the

problem drift, because one way or another it would surely settle itself.

Then there was the curious problem of Moran. She admitted now that he interested her, even that he stirred her. "In his way," she thought, "he is a big man. But his way is not my way. It's absurd to think that I would marry such a person. I'm not going to lose my head utterly."

She thought again of that question in May Isbell's eyes. She thought of the gossiping males at Armandeville et Cie. She even considered, with the sensation of being very deliberate indeed, her own instinctive hatred of a furtive life.

A taxi rolled by. The red metal flag was up. She raised her hand, then walked to meet it as it passed her and turned in to the curb. "I'll send to-morrow for my things at that big hotel," she thought. "And I'll give up my room there." She gave the number and got in, with a sudden deep sense of relief.

The taxi rolled swiftly up the Rue Royale toward the great dim Madeleine, that dominated solidly and splendidly the head of the street.

It passed Maxim's. She looked coldly out at the arch of white lights and red. Pictures rose in her mind—ugly pictures. She heard again that wild laugh of Stanley's from the revolving door. She saw, with a sudden shift, Adele sitting by the baby, weeping, her face buried on her arm. Yes, she and Adele had things in common. She would help her. "I've been selfish," she thought. "And back of that I've been a coward."

She stopped a moment at the hotel office, then ran on up the stairs.

Moran came softly out of her room as she approached it. He was even more sober than usual.

"The doctor's here," said he. "I'm afraid we're in for a little real trouble."

"Why?" asked Hilda, with swift concern. "What is it?"

"Acute bronchitis," he thinks. "Or perhaps pneumonia."

"Oh—" Hilda stared at him.

"I've got to get some water," said he then. And she saw the glass in his hand.

"Wait," said she, and laid a detaining hand on his arm. "About Adele. I've taken that adjoining room. They've put somebody in it to-night, but we can have it to-morrow. Adele can sleep in her own room to-night."

He shook his head. "No, she can't. They've turned her out of it. Didn't they tell you that down-stairs?"

"No. I didn't speak of her. Just arranged to take the two rooms." Hilda thought a moment. "Then I'll take her in with me for the rest of the night. That's simple."

His eyes were fixed on hers. He was the taller, and had to look down. It was an uncomfortably direct gaze; she could not meet it. Yet it was honest, and she could not take offense.

"I've got to get the water," he said, still gazing at her. "I'm glad you're back here," he added.

The ring of respectful but blunt admiration in his voice brought color to her cheeks; color that lingered as she passed swiftly by him into her room.

IX

HILDA WISHES ADELE WOULD KEEP HER HANDS OFF. AND IS SURPRISED TO HEAR HER NAME SPOKEN

THE fact that gave Hilda the deepest pain, during the days of anxious watching that followed the doctor's night call, was that so little could be done to help the baby in its struggle for breath and life. The windows were kept open, day and night; and a fire flickered steadily in the small grate. A screen and draped chair-backs were so placed about the basket as to shield the baby from drafts; and Hilda and Adele between them made a coat of light flannel wadded with cotton batting to keep the thin little body warm. The doctor prescribed little in the way of drugs. It was mainly a question of oxygen and food, he said. Accordingly, Hilda bent all her ingenuity to preparing the precise modification of milk that the baby seemed best able to digest and assimilate.

The doctor had suggested a nurse. But Hilda had shaken her head at this. She would not consider giving up any part of the laborious, hour-by-hour detail of caring for the helpless infant. And the doctor, a middle-aged American, reflectively considering the extraordinarily good-looking woman before him, so unmistakably a woman of training and ability, accepted her decision. And if his reflections, as his shrewd gaze wandered from Hilda to the wan-faced Adele, and from her to the celebrated Blink Moran who at that moment gravely entered the room with

a glass of water, ran off into dubious speculation, Hilda never knew it. For once, so deep were her thoughts regarding the frail little life in the basket, she did not consider the conventions at all. The doctor was there because it was his job to be there. He seemed to know his business. And that, in her intensity of feeling, was all she asked of him.

She worked so hard, indeed, during these days, that her mind dwelt only at rare intervals on the curious life she was living. She took to lying down and snatching a few moments of sleep whenever an opportunity offered; usually in Adele's room, because Moran came in and out at all hours. He sat with the baby a good deal, particularly after Hilda's discovery that Adele was eating next to nothing and was really in a run-down condition that bordered on illness. He became as deft as Hilda herself in handling the baby and in smoothing out and rearranging bed linen. During the first day or so Hilda found the extreme intimacy of some of the work rather embarrassing, but, realizing how wholesomely and completely Moran and Adele accepted every natural detail of life she deliberately thrust aside her self-consciousness in the matter.

Rather more difficult than this was the task of familiarizing herself with Adele's artless ways with Moran. Adele usually addressed him as "Dear" and "Dearie." She was continually taking his arm, or stroking his hand. More than once, when Hilda came in from her daily walk, she found Moran seated by the basket, chin on hand, gazing soberly down at the little being that was fighting instinctively and blindly to clear its inflamed bronchial passages and the slightly congested portion of its lungs; and Adele leaning on his shoulder, her arm about his neck, her slim fingers perhaps playing absently in his hair.

It did not seem to Hilda that Adele was in love with Moran. Certainly he was not in love with the girl; for it was invariably toward herself, Hilda reflected, that he showed the unself-conscious solicitude, even tenderness, that she found so restful and pleasing. As nearly as she could understand this rather queer business, he simply took Adele and her little attentions for granted. Certainly he never started or shifted his position when Hilda came in upon them. Nor did he ever himself caress Adele. Hilda told herself that Adele played about him as a child will play about a big dog. But nevertheless, she wished Adele wouldn't do it. More than once, when she found herself alone with Adele, the thought of these free and easy ways intruded into her mind and made her rather stiffer in manner than she would otherwise have been. But this slight stiffness made no difference to Adele. "She's not very fine," Hilda thought. Indeed, the child had early taken to calling Hilda by her given name. She did this quite naturally, as if she never addressed any one in any other way, and yet without the slightest diminution of the deference she so plainly felt toward Hilda.

One afternoon Hilda came in, pausing as usual before opening the door and making a little extra noise as a warning, and found the two, not by the baby, who was sleeping at the moment, but in Adele's room. Moran was seated on the sofa, one knee clasped in his big hands. Adele was curled up on the floor beside him, looking up with an eager light in her eyes. She heard the door open, and beckoned. Hilda winced, but went on into the room with them, threw aside her furs and coat, and dropped into a chair.

"Oh, Hilda, dear," Adele whispered, "what do you think has happened? You can't guess!"

Hilda smiled, rather wearily, and slowly shook her head.

"But do guess! It's happened to Blink. And it's wonderful."

Hilda searched her mind.

Adele's face fell. Then, more quietly, she explained.

"He's got his match with Carpentier."

Hilda compressed her lips. The simple announcement brought a curious and inexplicable little thrill. She looked, almost shyly, at the big man, her friend, seated there on the sofa. He was utterly unperturbed. She had never seen him otherwise. She had never heard him utter a hasty or emotional word. She had never even seen him make a hasty motion. He was slow—kind but slow, like the big dog Adele made of him. . . . Yet, the men she had seen fighting on that disconcertingly interesting evening out at Luna Park by the Porte Maillot, had been, every man, alert, swift, rushing creatures, tigers all. This man he was to meet, the great Carpentier, had exhibited a nervous agility in every movement of a finger. And yet Moran was admittedly a match for this alert champion, he was admittedly greater than those vigorous flashing fighters she had seen in action. The crowd that had gazed on him that night with such admiring curiosity knew that. They knew something about him that she, close as she now was to him, did not know at all. The passing thought stirred a curiously unreasonable little rush of emotion within her—an emotion not unlike crude primitive jealousy. Jealousy of a crowd of Frenchmen and women! . . . Moran himself knew this quality of his own nature, knew it so well that he never bothered to exhibit the faintest flash of it in his ordinary life. He never even seemed to think of it.

Hilda was disturbed—vaguely, but deeply.

Adele was chattering on—"It's to be a month from tonight, out at Luna Park. Blink's to have twenty thousand

francs, win, lose or draw, and the championship if he wins. Think of it, Hilda, dear—the heavyweight championship of France. And Blink a middleweight!"

Moran gravely shook his head at this. "Hardly a middleweight, Adele," he said. "I've put on too much for that. I shan't ever make a hundred and fifty-eight again—couldn't do it now, without weakening myself pretty seriously."

"But you won't weigh as much as Carpentier," Adele persisted.

"Pretty near it. I think I'll fight at about a hundred and seventy. That'll be giving him five to ten pounds—not so much!"

Hilda tried to reflect. "You—you'll be pretty busy now," she ventured, making a determined effort to cover her sudden sinking of heart.

He shook his head. "Not so much as if I was really out of condition, and had to train hard," he replied. "You see, until just lately, I've done gym work and wrestling and sparring, and even some road work now and then—oh, all fall and winter. And I've had fourteen fights since September. I'm really pretty fit right now. Probably for the last week or so, just before the fight, I ought to go out to the country and put in all my time at it . . ."

He hesitated, and his gaze wandered in through the open doorway to the baby's basket. Hilda's gaze followed his. And Adele's. They were silent for a little time.

The baby coughed; and they saw the basket shake with the effort. A faint whimpering followed. Hilda and Adele sprang up as one person and glided swiftly to the basket. Hilda smoothed out the bedding, and changed the baby's position a little. Then she and Adele, one on each

side of the basket, stood motionless while the baby drifted off again into a light restless sleep.

Adele was the first to slip back into the other room.

Hilda followed.

Moran was still seated, still clasping his knee in those solid hands of his. Adele was kneeling on the sofa beside him and had thrown an arm across his shoulders.

"We've got to work harder now, Hilda," she said, with a desperate sort of earnestness. "I haven't helped very much, but I'm going to do better. We've got to take care of Blink now, too."

He smiled at this. "You haven't got to take care of me, child," he said.

Adele nodded vigorously; her lips compressed, her eyes glistening. "You know, Blink," she insisted, giving his big, quite immovable shoulders an impulsive squeeze with her frail arm, "you've got to have your sleep. We're not going to let you in on the night work any more. You must be in bed every night by ten. If I have to see to it myself. Yes, I'm going to put your light out every night at ten."

Moran smiled again. "Eleven will do, Adele," he said. "Too much sleep is as bad as too little."

Adele merely shook her head at this, very firmly. And Hilda felt uncomfortably out of the situation. She wished Adele would let him alone. She wondered a little, with a strange stirring wonder, what could be the quality in a woman that would enable her to give her caresses so freely. Plainly, a casual embrace meant precisely nothing at all to this natural child of the stage. . . . It was not so with Hilda herself. She felt the color coming into her face, and bit her lip. For her to give a caress now would mean

—well, everything. She simply could not do it. Not unless she were ready to give everything. And this was unthinkable. Or was it? Torturingly vivid pictures flashed on her—bits of her own experience with the one man she had loved, the man who had held her close and pressed his lips to hers, the man from whom she had fled in a very panic of the soul and who had been forced, by the fineness of his own nature, to let her go. And ever since, her life had been incomplete. She was a cheated woman. She had worked, and worked, desperately. But now even the work had failed her. . . . The worst of it all was the utter confusion of it. She did not know what she was thinking or what she was feeling. There was the baby, suffering, and tugging at her heartstrings. Here was the man who was at once so big and so amazingly light and graceful and whose nature was mysteriously hidden from her, touching and stirring her imagination and making her think of the warm humanizing compensations of love. . . . She wished Adele would take her hands off him. And at the thought of the girl, all unconscious of self though she might be, slipping into his room at night and turning out his light, she went cold. Adele must not do that. She must not do that!

There was some relief from those queer thoughts in the fact that Moran, when he now spoke, addressed himself to her and not to Adele.

"It's queer," he was saying, "but every time, in my big fights, there has been something like this. When I met Willie Lewis in California—the first time—my mother was sick. She died three days after the fight. And at the time of my match with Billy Papke . . ." He did not go on with the story. Hilda caught him studying her, and thought that perhaps he feared depressing her. "It needn't

really make so much difference," he concluded. "I must do several hours' work each day, say every morning. And then, at night, before I go to bed, I'll put on a sweater and trot out to the fortifications and run for half an hour. That, and being fairly regular about my sleep, will be enough—up to the last week. Just to keep fit, and work up my wind a little." He glanced in again through the doorway, and his voice took on a gentler quality. "The doctor told me this noon, when I met him down-stairs, that we'll be through the worst of this within one or two weeks. It isn't going to be a really severe case, he thinks, even if it turns out to be pneumonia. It's only the weakness of the baby that worries him. And he said—I meant to tell you this, Hilda—that the way you're working out the feeding proposition will save her if anything can."

Hilda sat motionless in her chair, her hands limp in her lap. The color, that had already risen in her face, mounted richly now. It seemed to her that her face was fairly burning. For one unthinkable thing had happened on this instant. He had called her "Hilda." He had crossed a line. From this moment she would be "Hilda" to him; no doubt of that now. She, willy-nilly, had crossed the line with him. She wondered, with a tightening of her nerves, what experiences might lie on the farther side of that line. She wished, almost petulantly, that he hadn't spoken that name so calmly, so casually, almost as if it meant nothing at all to him. She wondered, even, if he knew he had spoken it.

She drew in a long breath. "I'm glad," she said, "that he feels that way about it." Then she rose, and busied herself picking up her coat and her furs and putting them away in her own room. She sat down beside the baby before she realized that her hat was still on her head. So she got up again, took it off, and put it in its compartment in

her wardrobe trunk. And all the time her color was up, and her pulse beat fast, and there was a pressure at her temples and at the back of her head. She wished Adele would come in here with her, and felt relieved when the girl did. Moran went out.

X

HILDA AT LAST HAS A GLIMPSE OF THE REAL MORAN; AND WHAT FOLLOWS SO MOVES HER THAT SHE THINKS SHE WILL GIVE ADELE SOMETHING TO WEAR

WHEN Moran entered her room, at a little after eight that evening, Hilda did not look up. She was seated by the window, gazing down into the quiet street. She felt tired and depressed. The baby was crying, interrupting itself with weak fits of coughing. Adele was in her own room, washing out the baby's clothes; and had shut the door, for quiet.

Hilda heard Moran stepping slowly and carefully across the room; and felt her pulse quicken. This would not do. She steeled herself against the emotion that this man could now stir in her by merely entering the room.

He paused, just behind her. Still she did not lift her eyes; but, chin on hand, fingers pressed against her mouth, she watched a fiacre that was rumbling by. The enameled white hat of the rotund driver reflected one street and window light after another as it moved slowly past.

Moran dropped his hand on her shoulder.

Hilda stirred to shake it off; but the movement was no more than a slight stirring, and he seemed unaware of it. His hand was solid and warm on her shoulder, yet it was light. For a flash she thought of asking him to take it away. But this seemed hardly fitting. She must not exhibit her own self-consciousness by making too much of

what was to him a natural action. The thing to do was to say something offhand. But her throat was dry; and no words came at the moment. Finally, the silence lengthened out, until he too became self-conscious, and removed his hand. This did not relieve the situation.

She heard him tiptoe back to the baby's basket. He busied himself there for a moment; doubtless he was straightening out the wrinkled sheet. She had done this herself not a quarter of an hour earlier.

Soon he came back and stood beside her in the open window, looking down at her. She could feel that he was looking down. She decided to raise her eyes.

He was dressed in a black sweater with a high rolling collar, a pair of old flannel trousers, and the sort of light canvas and rubber shoes that Hilda knew as "sneakers." He had a steamer cap in his hand. The sweater was tight, and disclosed the outlines of his splendid body—the chest wide and deep, tapering down toward his waist and hips.

She manufactured a weary smile. "Beginning your road work?"

He nodded. She felt that he was studying her, and lowered her eyes.

"Adele told me you didn't eat any dinner," said he.

She gave a little shrug. "I didn't want it. I'm all right. I've eaten enough to-day."

"Have you been out?"

She hesitated. "Well—no, if you will pin me down. But I had that long tramp yesterday. And to-morrow—"

"That's what I thought," said he. "You come on out with me."

"Not now?"

"Yes. Now."

Hilda smiled again. He did amuse her. "What is it to

be this time? Have I got to do this road work with you?" She looked up now. "I'm not so good at running as I used to be."

He did not return her smile. "Come on," he said. "We'll leave Adele on the job. There's nothing you can do now for an hour, anyway." And when she was putting on her old homespun storm coat and the soft felt hat, he added: "The thing for you to do, Hilda, is to get out now, while you can. It isn't going to be so easy next week, I'm afraid."

She glanced sidewise as she passed the mirror. This was the costume she had worn that evening of the fights at the Porte Maillot. And he had been in evening dress! She watched him as he moved to the door and opened it, after speaking to Adele. She liked him better in this costume. She fancied she could see the muscles play beneath the heavy sweater. So at last he was to have his big match. He was to fight the great Carpentier. It would call out all his speed and craft and power. He would be the tiger-man —he would have to be in order to hold his own with the champion of France and England. And she would see him!

They walked out behind the Madeleine, across the Boulevard Malesherbes, and through back streets to the Champs Elysées. Moran moved with an easy swinging stride, loose of hips and lithe of back. He made no pretense of slowing up for her; only once asking if the pace was too brisk. At this question she laughed a little, and stepped out more vigorously, with a stride not unlike his own. It had been like this on each of their recent walks. He always swept her along in a way that forced her to breathe more deeply and brought the color to her cheeks.

The bare winter trees were thick about them as they swung rhythmically along the wide path. Lounging French youths eyed them curiously as they passed—the big man in

cap and sweater and soft shoes, and the young woman in gray coat and soft black hat who moved with a grace as easy if not as bold as his. Straight on up the gradual incline to the Arc de Triomphe they walked, and across the curving roadway, dodging taxis, and through the arch. It had been their custom to turn off here into the Avenue Kléber toward the Trocadéro and the Seine; but to-night he went on into the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. She kept by his side, asking no questions.

The broad avenue, with its wide borders of grass and its trees, was like a park. It was nearly deserted: an occasional automobile went by; and they saw one love-lorn couple on a bench. Moran nodded his head toward the couple as they passed.

"Have you got used to that yet, Hilda?" he asked—"the way they make love everywhere?"

"I know," she said. "It did take me several trips to get used to the kissing in the restaurants."

Moran chuckled. "They don't care."

"No," Hilda agreed, "they don't care."

At a bench farther on he stopped and took her arm.

"Here's a good place to do my running," he said. "You won't catch cold if you sit down a while, will you—ten or fifteen minutes?"

Hilda shook her head. "Of course not."

"Better button up your coat, though."

She obeyed, wondering a little as she did so. It was an odd sensation, this of accepting the guidance of a man in the little personal details of one's life; but it was not an unpleasant sensation.

"Now you sit down," he said, "and count the laps for me. There ought to be about seven or eight to the mile—say eight."

She followed his gaze, and saw that he was measuring one of the subdivisions of the parkway, cut off by transverse paths.

"I don't think any one can bother you," he added. "I'll be in sight all the time, except when I'm behind that clump of trees. And I'll pass you every half minute or so."

"I'm not afraid," she replied. "Go ahead."

He took off his sweater, and spread it out for her on the bench. Then he stood before her, all white in his flannel trousers and soft shirt that was open at the neck. "I'll do twenty laps, Hilda. That'll be about two miles and a half. You keep count now!"

"Go ahead," said she again.

He turned and was off with a bound. She followed the white figure—along the roadway, off to the left, down a sloping path, and then, smaller, jogging along the farther roadway behind the shrubs and trees. When he passed her for the first time she caught her first real impression of his activity and power. He seemed to spring upward and forward with each step.

It interested her, too, to observe that his running was methodical, businesslike. His head was well back, as were his shoulders. His elbows were close to his sides; his feet slanting so that his weight fell well forward of the heels. She wished that he would let himself out a little more when he passed her. Indeed, knowing the almost universal impulse in men of all ages to exhibit their physical prowess to the maximum before women, she rather expected it. But he did nothing of the sort, merely trotted round and round the shadowy quadrangle, occasionally calling out to know the number of laps.

She had never seen such endurance. She could not perceive that he was even breathing hard. And while he did

not seem to be running very fast, still his long bounding strides were carrying him over the ground, she knew, at a really rapid rate.

As he passed for the fourteenth time, he called:

"Let me know when I've done sixteen."

She nodded, wondering a little. Then, as his white figure was rounding the turn and disappearing behind the trees, she realized that he meant to quicken his pace for the last half mile. Memories of college athletic contests she had seen came to her. Runners always "sprinted" at the end, of course. At last she was to see him extend himself.

Once more he passed, at the same even gait. Unconsciously Hilda sat erect, even moved forward on the seat. She had been keeping count on her fingers; but now she clasped her hands.

There he was, coming up the transverse path. He turned into the road; jogging easily nearer and nearer.

She stood up, and waved the black sweater at him.

"All right!" she cried. "It's sixteen."

He gave her a casual nod, and came steadily along. Then, just as he passed her, standing there at the edge of the gravelly path, he shot forward.

Hilda drew in an involuntary quick breath. The moment had come for which she had been waiting ever since her eyes first rested on the man. It was as if some irresistible force had suddenly come to life within him. His stride had lengthened; his loose-playing hips and muscular back had suddenly become a part of the stride. His whole splendid body was in action.

He swung out across the path in order to make a wider turn, then shot down the cross-path. She watched him flying along the back stretch; and up the other cross-path. He came swinging out around the turn, and in a few sec-

onds was past her. He did not give her so much as a glance now; his thoughts were bent on getting out every available ounce of energy. She could see that. And he seemed younger than she had ever thought him; indeed, it gave her a momentary pang to think how young he appeared. And he was beautiful. Yes, beautiful! A lithe bounding creature, full of exuberant health, as God surely meant man to be. She forgot the Gothic eyelid, that had made her smile at first. She forgot that he sometimes seemed slow and a little lacking in mental responsiveness. She thought of him now only as the strong, vibrant, yet splendidly self-controlled man he certainly had proved himself to be. She even thought of him, with a curious flutter of inner excitement, as he would appear in the ring, facing the great Carpentier—stripped to loin-cloth and shoes, a lithe powerful tiger of a man, with shining sweaty skin and delicately playing muscles beneath it.

She was glad, too, that this exhibition was not of the beautiful but heartless strength of unthinking youth. For it was not. It was the strength of a man of unusual soberness and, even, of kindness. It was a calculated strength, to be used deliberately toward an end. There was no uncertainty in it; no waste. His body was a perfect engine, under perfect control.

He passed her again, running even more rapidly at every step pounding solidly on the smooth oily surface of the avenue, yet light as a greyhound. "Why," she breathed, "he's a bundle of steel springs! It is wonderful!" And again she peered after him through the semi-darkness, fascinated by the way every muscle from hips to shoulders seemed to be playing its part in those swift leaping strides.

At the beginning of the last lap she shouted after him: "You've done nineteen!" And she thought he nodded.

This time when he swung into the road from the back stretch he extended himself still more. If she had not seen this final burst of speed she would not have believed it possible.

He ran on for a hundred feet or more beyond her before pulling himself up. Then he walked back, holding his cap in his hand and mopping his face with his handkerchief. She hurried to meet him, and held his sweater for him as if it had been a coat. He accepted the little attention simply and naturally. She saw that this extra effort had, as he himself would have said, "got to him." He was breathing hard.

They walked on a little way; she thoughtful, he continuing to mop his face and neck as he buttoned his sweater.

She suddenly laid a hand on his arm and stopped short, swinging him around.

"You're a wonderful man!" she said impulsively. Then, as suddenly, she compressed her lips and walked on.

He shook his head. "No," said he, "I'm softer than I thought. Three weeks from now I'll be doing ten miles, and I won't be blowing like this either."

She let this pass. They approached a narrow street, leading off to the right.

"Had enough walking?" he asked.

"You've had enough," she replied. "Anyway, you're all heated up now, and you ought to get right back."

"Oh, no," said he, "not with this sweater on, and if I keep moving. If you say so, we'll take our regular walk—around by the river."

"It would be nice to see it at night, if you're sure . . ."

He slipped his arm through hers, and turned her off down the side street. He kept her arm, moving her along at a faster pace than he had ever taken with her before.

She pressed his arm firmly and stepped right out with him. It was exhilarating. But she found it difficult to talk; and, in fact, kept silent.

They emerged on the grounds of the Trocadéro Palace, crossing the street and walking up into the curving porch that connects the main building with the right wing. Here, between the great columns, Hilda stopped short and held her breath in sheer delight at the scene that had suddenly appeared before her eyes. Moran's arm was still locked with hers.

Directly beneath them, a little to the left, extended the terraced fountains, half a hundred yards of masonry and statuary, faintly lighted by the numerous globes that dot the little park. Beside the fountains, directly in front of Hilda and her escort, lay the gardens, sloping down to the Quai. Just beyond flowed the Seine; a smooth glistening river, specked with innumerable quivering reflections of the lights along the farther bank. From a point on the Quai opposite the center of the Trocadéro Gardens leaped out a curving double arch of lights which Hilda knew for the Pont d'Iéna.

She looked off to the right, down-stream; but found the view blocked by trees and buildings. To the left, however, half a mile up-stream and on the farther bank, she could see, through a net of bare branches, the blazing red lights that mark the entrance to that newest and most garish of amusement resorts, "le Magic City."

Hilda pressed Moran's arm. "See," she said, "how that red light shines in the water. Isn't it wonderful?"

He nodded slowly and reflectively.

"I can't get used to the idea of these Magic Cities and Luna Parks—in Paris." She laughed softly.

"I know," said he. "Things have changed so much even

since I came here that sometimes I want to pinch myself. But I guess that's Paris, after all—picking up everything new from everywhere, and playing with it."

Hilda gazed out over the bridge toward the Champ-de-Mars, now a great dark reach of open country twinkling with thousands of lights. Then she looked up.

There it was—dim and high—rising from the very center of the thousands of lights—a thin spider's web stretched from earth to clouds—the Eiffel Tower.

"It is wonderful," said she, "how these Paris views are arranged. They are always leading your eye up to some wonderful building or monument."

"Yes," said he, "it is a well-planned city. I guess those fellows knew their business."

They walked slowly down the winding path beside the fountains, and turned to the left along the Quai—toward the Place de la Concorde, the Madeleine, and the little hotel that was for the time their common home.

"Listen," said she, after they had walked for a few moments without speaking, "I've got to be there when you box Carpentier."

He inclined his head. "Of course I'd like to have you there, Hilda. It will be easy enough to manage, if things are all right with the baby."

"I know," said she. "I was thinking of that, too. It's too soon to plan, of course. But I'm coming if I can." Her thoughts ranged ahead, scheming out ways and means of devising her reappearance on the Rue de Rivoli and at Armandeville's; perhaps as one just returned from a tour. It would not be difficult to plan a leading conversation that would end in one of the handy men from Armandeville's acting as her escort—or somebody. Perhaps they would get up a little party. Natural curiosity, the adventurous im-

pulse of the sightseer, would explain her desire to do so unconventional a thing. . . . Come to think of it, Ed Johnson would be turning up in Paris within the month, after his annual combing-out of the glove manufacturing towns of Spain, Italy, Austria and Germany. If his time worked out right she would make Ed take her.

Then, quite suddenly and vividly, pictures rose in her mind of the helpless waif of a baby there in her own room. She felt guilty that she had thought even for an hour of herself and her own pleasures. She quickened her step.

"What is it?" he asked. "Are you cold?"

"No," said she. "It's the baby. We must hurry back."

"All right," said he. Then—"About the fight? I can fix it."

She waited for him to go on; but he added nothing. So she said: "Oh, don't bother. You'll have all you can attend to. I'll make some one take me. Only I'll have to keep very quiet and look my properest, so they won't know how anxious I shall be for you."

"You needn't be anxious, Hilda."

Again they were silent for a space. Once she stole a sidelong glance at him, under a street light. His brows were knit. He was thinking hard. She pressed his arm a little closer.

Several moments more passed before he began, slowly and very soberly:

"Now listen here, Hilda—" Then he stopped.

"I'm listening," said she.

"I want to tell you about this—about how things are. . . . You see, I've never saved very much. I never had to somehow. My father's pretty thrifty. But it doesn't seem to be very hard for me to make money. Two years ago was my best year. I cleaned up almost nineteen thousand

dollars. Net, I mean—above all extra training expenses and Henry's share."

The unusual exuberance that had been rising in Hilda's spirit during the evening was quieting down. A queer foreboding had crept into her mind. She was sure that she had caught a note of emotion in his voice. What was he getting at, in talking to her of his personal finances. She slipped her arm out from his.

"Nineteen thousand dollars!" she exclaimed, in her most matter-of-fact voice. "That's a lot."

"Yes," said he, "it is. But I shall beat it this season, I think—with this Carpentier match. A boxer can earn a good deal, you know, nowadays."

"I should say so. Why, I've got what is considered an unusually good job, in my line, and I don't earn anything like that. Eight thousand is my limit, so far."

"Eight thousand!" It was his turn to exclaim. He looked down at her. "I didn't know any woman earned as much as that."

"You didn't!" said she, a thought nettled. "Why shouldn't a woman earn it?"

"I don't know," said he. "I guess I've never thought about it. Then you're used to living pretty well. Yes, I can see that. And that's—of course, if you're as independent as all that, it makes the whole thing look different. I don't know as I could—"

Hilda interrupted him here, gazing out over the twinkling surface of the river to conceal the smile that she could not wholly suppress. "Tell me—who is Henry?"

"Henry Huybers, my manager. I was going to say—keeping in condition as I do, and not fussing with the white lights, I ought to be really good for—well, say three or four years more. Two, anyway. With what I've got saved now,

and all I ought to be able to shake down in these few years ahead, I expect to be fairly well fixed. You see, my reputation is getting bigger all the time, and likely as not my publicity value will be greatest for a year or so after I've begun to slow up. Even if Carpentier beats me, this match is bound to be a big help."

"He won't beat you," said Hilda.

"No, I don't think he will myself. But you never can tell. I may not be quite so good as I think. And then, in this game, there's always the possibility of the weaker man winning on a lucky blow. You have to take your chances. Well, as I was going to say—"

Hilda was trying desperately, and unsuccessfully, to think up ways of diverting him. One difficulty was that she could not down the curiously unexpected buoyancy of spirit that was surging up again within her. She even caught herself humming a little café tune. It was the sprightly one-step, *Tingle, Tingle,* that Will Harper had danced to, at the Parnasse.

"—a man in my position ought to look ahead. I've had my lines out for a couple of years in a business way. It seems to me that aeroplanes are the coming thing, and I've invested a little already in a company that a French fellow I know is starting. It looks as if he had worked out the stabilizer at last. And if he has, and can make a real showing, I thought maybe I'd put a little more in. You see—"

Hilda was at her wit's end. There was not the slightest doubt now that he was very serious indeed, dangerous even. She felt vaguely afraid—of herself as well as of him. She wanted to put her hands over her ears; to sing out loud, talk rapidly and excitedly, do anything but listen to that sober slow voice, with its constant and fascinating suggestion of unlimited strength of character in reserve behind it.

But instead of doing any of these things, she was fighting back the soft smile that would keep on hovering about her mouth. The only thing she seemed able to do with any success was to keep her face turned so that he could not see it, and gaze steadily at that beautiful river.

"—you see, I wouldn't be any good in a regular business. They'd go through me in no time. I'd be lucky to keep my clothes. But this aeroplane thing is a little more in my line. I could take to driving the machines myself. Be a practical demonstrator, you know. And then the business would have to pay me something regular instead of just taking my money away from me. I'd have to do something active, you see. I'd never be happy any other way."

They had reached the Place de la Concorde. He took her arm again, and guided her across the broad areas of pavement from one lamplit isle to another. His touch was a caress.

"I've wanted to talk this all over with you pretty seriously, Hilda, because—well, I'd have to tell you all about how I'm fixed and what my prospects are before—"

Hilda again got her arm away, and threw out both hands in a sudden gesture. "Don't let's talk seriously!" she cried. "I don't want to talk seriously!"

He made no reply at all to this; and they walked on in silence.

The lights of Maxim's were just ahead. She could see the pasty-faced little chasseur at the door, waiting, in his blue uniform and leather puttees, for the night's business to begin; and she thought of Stanley. Where was he? and what was he doing? The distinctly unpleasant thought came to her that, likely as not, he was even now engaged in the rather commonplace occupation (among weak and over-

nervous men) known as "going to pieces." Just one more American in Paris, blowing up. She even felt a queer twinge of conscience, as if she were, after all, responsible for Stanley.

She stole a glance at her silent escort. His face told her nothing. He looked just as he always looked. He was silent. But then he was often silent. She wondered what he was thinking. Had she hurt him? Or did he just think her capricious, "feminine"? He was always kind. But he didn't take women very seriously. It came to her now for the first time that he would undoubtedly be pretty conservative about women. Cruelly idealistic, even. For rough practical men, she knew, were often just that. . . . She stole another glance at him, but said nothing. It occurred to her, just then, that it was usually she who broke the silences. She would let him be the first to break this one. It would be a contest. She would make him feel her strength, as he had so often made her feel his.

So they walked on, briskly and steadily, side by side, each looking straight ahead. Hilda was determined not to look at him again; and her lips were compressed. She knew, without looking at him, that his lips were not compressed, that it was literally no effort at all for him to control himself. She wondered how much of this exasperatingly quiet power of his was real character, as she understood the word, and how much was nothing more than lack of imagination. Certainly, however, positive or negative though it might be, the power was there. It was a fact.

They came to the end of the street, crossed the Place de la Madeleine, and walked around the great temple, in the shadow, to the Rue Tronchet and its little tributary street in which their modest Hotel de l'Amerique was the dom-

mant structure. At the crossings he would have taken her arm again, had she given him the opportunity. But at each she stepped off rapidly and a little ahead of him. . . . What a man! He had gone through an elaborate explanation that could have been meant only as the preliminary step to a proposal of marriage. Then, at her first mild protest, he had stopped short. She almost wished she had let him go through with it. . . . Now why *had* he stopped in that way? She read him for the kind of man who would certainly fight hard for anything he really wanted. Once fully aroused, he would be irresistible. Was it that she had failed to stir him deeply? Or that he had blundered prematurely into his proposal, and, finding his mistake, had decided to settle back and deliberately wait for a better time? Or could it be that he was not analyzing the situation at all? . . . Any way she tried to puzzle it out, she could reach no other conclusion than that there was something in the very texture of his mind that lay outside the range of her experience. "I don't understand him," she thought. And it nettled her that she didn't.

They entered the hotel, still without speaking, and walked up the stairs side by side. There was a red carpet on those stairs, with a green figure. Hilda studied the carpet as she went up. She had never noticed it before, beyond noting vaguely that it was there.

He came to her door with her. She opened it and peered in. Adele was sitting there, in the dim light from the shaded electric lamp. The colored tissue-paper was still wrapped about that lamp, that she had put there during her first night with the baby. That seemed a long time ago.

The baby was sleeping at the moment. Standing motionless in the doorway, Hilda could hear her rapid hoarse

breathing. So everything was all right, or as nearly all right as could be expected. She turned to say good night to Moran. She was distinctly tired. It was not easy to muster up a smile

He extended his hand.

She took it.

Then he said: "Good night, Hilda. Get all the sleep you can."

He had spoken first. She had won. Even at the moment she knew well enough that her sudden little uprush of jubilant feeling was pure childishness. . . . But was it, though?

She replied with a whispered "Good night"; then slipped into the room and closed the door softly behind her.

She went over to Adele, and rested a light hand on her shoulder. She felt in an unusually kindly frame of mind toward Adele; gentle, even. It occurred to her that she hadn't fully realized before what a really desperate condition the girl was in, and with what a sweet spirit she was making the best of that situation. Not a word of complaint had been heard from her.

Adele looked up, with a swift smile, and reached up to caress Hilda's hand.

Hilda saw that the girl had a handkerchief crumpled in her other hand, and that she was sniffling.

"You've been crying, child," she whispered.

Adele's smile lingered. "It's my cold, mostly," she replied. "I seem to have caught it from the baby."

"Then you go right to bed and get some rest. I'll get into a negligee and lie down in here."

When Adele had gone, Hilda reflected, standing at her wardrobe trunk and swinging the clothes hangers, that

were crowded with suits, frocks, wraps and dainty things:

"That poor child doesn't even own a negligee to get into. I must give her some things to wear. She is nearly my height—they won't need much altering. She is such a simple, honest little thing, I know she would be grateful."

XI

HILDA RECEIVES A LETTER, WHICH SHE WILL OPEN IN A FEW MINUTES

HILDA was up with the baby at intervals all night. And Adele was in and out, most of the time with a slim forefinger pressed against her upper lip to keep back the sneeze.

"Adele," Hilda said, toward morning, "don't run around in your nightgown, child! You'll simply bring yourself down sick. Somebody's got to keep well around here, or there *will* be a smash."

Adele, obedient, put on her long boyish overcoat; even lay down in it, across her bed, in order to be ready at a moment's notice to come to Hilda's assistance.

Hilda herself thought of many things during those long half-hours of standing or sitting by the basket; or when she was heating bottles, or putting coal on the fire, or standing in the window looking down into the quiet street. Over in the Rue Tronchet it was not so quiet, for the carts and wagons of the vegetable men were clanging over the pavement on their way to early morning market.

A hundred times during the long night she thought of her odd little scene with Moran. She wondered what he was thinking. It occurred to her that he was doubtless sleeping like a healthy child. Then she fell to wondering

what he would say at their next meeting. In the morning this would be, surely.

But in the morning the baby was distinctly weaker; and Adele was crawling about with a hard cold and an aching back. Moran, when he came in, appeared not to have a personal thought in his head. He studied Adele rather closely, then slipped back to his own room and got an atomizer for Hilda. "Better use it," he said. "It will keep this cold from getting hold of you, I think." For which Hilda thanked him.

The English chorus girls had been little in evidence of late, beyond making daily inquiries. But on this morning—along toward noon—Hilda called Millicent in to stay with Adele and the baby while she went out. She felt none too well herself; a breath of air would clear her head for the anxiety and strain that were plainly to be her portion. She had let her mail go for several days; and now decided that the short walk over to the American Express office would give her the necessary outing and at the same time enable her to catch up somewhat in her own affairs.

She felt rather uncomfortable in the prospect of this errand. So many Americans drift through those big offices at the corner of the Rue Auber and the Rue Scribe. Indeed, the entire neighborhood of the Place de l'Opèra seems sometimes to be little more than a promenade for English-speaking travelers. And she herself was now supposed to be traveling—somewhere in the French Provinces, on the Riviera, in Italy, at winter sports in Switzerland—anywhere but here. It simply would not do for any of her acquaintances to see her. Of course, there were possible explanations. But she must not permit herself to be caught in a situation that would call for explanations. Her story was

complex enough now. She thought, with a bitter half-smile, as she stepped out of the hotel, of her unexpected encounter with Stanley, and of that irritating moment when she had been compelled to walk away from the waiting taxi because it would not do for Stanley to overhear her address.

And she had had two or three narrow escapes. One afternoon, as she and Moran were crossing the Champs Elysées, a big motor-car had nearly run them down. Seated in the limousine, with an enameled beauty of the boulevards at his side, was old M. Armandeville—stiffly erect, eyeglasses on nose, pointed gray beard sticking out aggressively before him. He had not seen her. She was sure of that. But suppose he had—she, the extraordinarily moral creature from America, who had rebuked him with an air so superior to his frankly human weakness, who had announced that she was to be traveling somewhere "with friends," calmly walking the Champs Elysées in the friendly company of a big roughish man with a strong face and a Gothic eyelid!—What would he think? Or rather—and that fleeting bitter smile came again—what wouldn't he think! Paris being what it is! . . . On another occasion she had passed Mr. Levy on the boulevard near the Grand Hotel. And ship acquaintances. One group she had been forced to bow to. What if they should happen to meet certain other persons! Likely as not, this very coincidence would work out. For that is what inevitably happens, she reflected, when one sets out on a course of deception. Even of justifiable deception.

One man she had avoided only by stepping swiftly into a shop door. He was Abraham Kutzner, of the New York house of Kutzner & Co., a very rich Jew, now more or less withdrawn from active business, who was living in Paris and acquiring a sort of culture for use in his later years.

Kutzner knew nearly every one that she herself knew in the department store universe. M. Armandeville was his close associate. At times, even, to her decided discomfort of mind, he had ranked himself among her own pursuers. . . . So she slipped into a doorway while he walked magnificently by.

She decided to keep off the boulevards altogether on this occasion. She walked around to the Rue Auber by way of the Rue des Mathurins.

It occurred to her that she must be more careful about appearing on the streets with Moran. She would walk with him only in the evenings after this. It did not occur to her that this decision was in the nature of an admission of her growing attachment for him, that there was self-consciousness, as well as caution, in her attitude; for her thoughts had suddenly taken a new direction. How could she be sure that Stanley had not already seen her! And with Moran! She had glimpsed him at one of his worst moments; and he did not know. It was every whit as likely that he might right now have grounds for a new and curious attitude toward her. And this directly after she had so indiscreetly told him of her own early love for Harris Doreyn!

Why had she told him that? Stanley Aitcheson, of all persons . . . her deepest secret! And why had that miserable old sorrow arisen at all in her thoughts after all these years? . . . It occurred to her now that she must close her mind to these memories. And she must stop talking about Harris Doreyn—must stop this occasional quoting of bits of his philosophy that had so largely, during the years, become her own philosophy. She had quoted him to Moran on several occasions. Doubtless to others. Perhaps it had come to be more of a habit than she real-

ized, this bringing up the name of the man who had stirred and influenced her so vitally, years back, when she was younger and life was brighter and richer in promise. She decided to be more careful about this.

There is a café at the farthest corner of the Rue des Mathurins and the Rue Auber. As she turned the corner she happened to glance across the street. There, at one of the half dozen little iron and marble tables on the sidewalk, sat Stanley. His chair was close to a charcoal brazier. His overcoat was buttoned to his chin, the collar turned up about his ears. He was drinking something—a highball—judging by the soda bottle at his elbow. Even at that distance she could see that there was no color in his face. And he was drinking in the morning!

He did not see her. A brief moment and she had lost him behind the cab rank that occupied the middle of the street. Once out of his possible sight she walked more slowly. The feeling of responsibility for him surged again within her. She wondered what he was up to. It was not really her responsibility, of course. But she had seen human wrecks before this. And surely Stanley was close to the breakers. She stopped, irresolute, with the pretense of studying a shop window. It was quite possible that the boy had no money. At the pace at which he had been moving even considerable sums will melt like the morning dew.

For a moment she even considered crossing the street and speaking to him. Then reconsidered. It wouldn't do. He would be at her heels again. There would be infinite complications. Worse, there would be reproaches; brainstorms, likely. She thought of the baby, lying helpless in its basket. No, Stanley would have to find himself. She walked on.

There was the possibility, the probability even, of meeting him before she could get safely away from the American Express offices. But this did not occur. And with her two letters unopened in her hand she hurried out and walked clear around by way of the Boulevard Haussmann in order to avoid passing that little café.

Back in the Rue Tronchet, she opened one of her letters and read it, walking slowly. It was from Joe Hemstead, and had to do with this very matter of Stanley. She was glad now that she had not spoken to him.

"I have written Levy," so ran the letter, "asking him to hunt the boy up, buy his steamer ticket, give him what little money he may actually need, and ship him back. Also I have written Aitcheson himself, care of the American Express—he'll look in there, almost certainly—and have cabled Ed Johnson to have an eye out for him. I hope he won't make you any trouble, just now, as you are beginning your vacation, but if he does, you had better just use your judgment about calling on Levy to handle him for you. Of course you know that the Armandeville people will do everything possible for you at any time. Don't hesitate to call on them. And the best of luck to yourself! Take plenty of time. Don't think of coming back until you are in the best of health and ready to tackle all sorts of problems with enthusiasm. That's your job for the present—to make yourself fit. And the more you enjoy yourself over there, the fitter you'll be when you return. . . ."

So much for Stanley! He would be looked out for, which was a relief.

She did not think of the other letter until she was entering the hotel. On the stairs she glanced at it, but the light was not very good. It had been addressed in longhand—"Miss Hilda Wilson, care the Hartman Store, New York"

—and then redirected from her own office. She recognized the neat penmanship of her stenographer, Grace Mahan.

She paused on the landing and looked at it under the light. There was something familiar about that hand. She held it closer to the light. Then came a sudden quickening of her pulse, and she began to feel that pressure at her temples and in the back of her head that had for months now been a familiar fact in her life.

She knew that hand. She slipped her thumb under the flap of the envelope, then hesitated to open it. Her color was running high, absurdly high. She could feel it.

What could be in that envelope! Not a long communication, for it was thin. She held it up again, and stared at the rather large handwriting. There was only one person in the world who formed an "H" in just that way—with a loop of the cross-mark about the first upright stroke. She had seen it so many thousands of times—in his own signature, in bits of office memoranda, in countless notes to herself, during those puzzling, tempestuous, and finally bitter years.

Again she slipped her thumb under the flap of the envelope.

There was a quick step on the stairs, beneath her. She turned. It was the doctor. He always ran up the stairs, that doctor, despite his considerable burden of years and his long residence among the leisurely folk of Paris. She liked him.

"Moran just sent for me," he said, with his usual offhand nod.

She hurried after him to her own room.

Adele, half ill now, and Moran were there. Millicent was just leaving, with alarm on her soft pretty face.

The baby had come, during Hilda's brief absence, to a downright struggle for breath, to something almost like a collapse.

The doctor took sharp hold. He first ordered Adele to bed. He instructed Hilda to heat some water, and then, while this rather slow process was under way, opened his medicine chest and administered some sort of stimulant. Himself, he undressed the baby; telling Moran over his shoulder, to prepare the little tub on a convenient chair and bring a bath towel.

Hilda got her bath thermometer, and, following instructions, filled the tub half full of the hot water, adding cold water until it stood at a temperature of one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Then the doctor, with deft hands, threw off the covers, laid the baby on the bath towel, which he then gathered up at the ends like a hammock, and lowered the thin little body into the bath until only the face was above water.

Hilda stood, started, breathless even, looking on. But Moran, after a moment, relieved the doctor; who then asked Hilda for a blanket, which he spread out on the bed.

For upward of ten minutes, Moran kept the baby there, holding the two gathered ends of the towel in his big hands, carefully keeping the little face clear of the water. Then the doctor had him bring her to the bed, and himself, very gently, laid her on the woolen blankets and covered her warmly. To Hilda's surprise, the baby dropped off into the quietest sleep she had had for days.

Hilda followed the doctor into the hall, and drew the door to behind her.

"Tell me, please," she said, "exactly what you think?"

The doctor met her gaze. If he felt any curiosity about her, it was not apparent. Had Hilda been thinking of her-

self, she would have realized that there was a very friendly directness about that gaze of his. But at the moment she was not thinking of herself.

"It is impossible to say," he replied. "Of course, as you can see, the child won't be able to endure very much of this sort of thing. But on the other hand, there may not be so much more of it to endure. In another day or so we shall know." He added a few clear instructions, and went away.

Moran, when Hilda reentered the room, was sitting beside the bed, carefully holding up the heavy folds of the blanket so that they would not weigh down too heavily on the baby's chest.

"He says," whispered Hilda, "that if she has any more of those attacks we're to do the same thing—the warm bath—a hundred degrees. And we're not to dress her at all before he comes again. Just keep her warm, and have plenty of air. . . . He left a prescription for Adele, didn't he?"

"On the bureau," Moran replied, without looking up. "If you'll sit here and hold this blanket, Hilda, I'll take it out and have it filled."

So she took his place; and he left.

She had dropped Doreyn's letter on a chair by the door along with her wrist-bag, muff and gloves. She looked over now and saw it lying there. It was the first communication from him in—she had been with the Hartman store eight years and a few months—it was three years after that, in January, five years back, that they had given her Mrs. Hanford's desk on the fifth floor, in the corner behind the stock cabinets, and had sent her on her first independent trip to Paris. Before that she had come as Mrs. Hanford's assistant. And it was just before making that

first trip under the new responsibilities, with the new salary that had quite taken her breath away, that she had gone out to Indiana to see her mother and Harry and Margie and bring them the glad news. And Harris Doreyn was on that train! She had met him face to face in the aisle of the sleeping car. Yes, it was five years since she had seen him or heard from him; five years and one month.

It came back to her with a rush—incidents that she thought she had forgotten—their stiffness and the little difficulties of readjustment, for they had not met for three years before that. She said things that sounded cold, hard even. She put on a casual manner that, she could see, disturbed him. Somehow their minds, or their talk at least, went at cross-purposes that day. Some of the things she said definitely hurt him. Then she could have bitten her tongue out, for she knew so well the depth and mental honesty and loyalty of the man; but her pride kept her deeper feelings back. Then—she remembered it so well now—he grew moody and silent, and the old melancholy that she had seen there in the worst days of his struggles came into his lean face. And that had silenced her utterly.

There was something disturbing in the vividness of these sudden memories—in the thought that they could be so vivid after the years. She had lived through so much, and had changed so. It was not altogether pleasant to reflect on some of these changes in herself. She had become more efficient, harder headed, less easily moved by sentiment. Or so she would have supposed. Yet the mere holding in her hand of an envelope addressed to her by this man had stirred her.

More and more vividly it came back to her. The curious,

half-spoken quarrel—about nothing whatever but the intensity of the emotions they had once shared and the distance in time and new habits that had come between them. The dinner together in the dining car, with its undertone of the old furtiveness, its spasmodic efforts at avoiding vital topics—the vital topic. The moment, in passing from car to car, when he had caught her arm to steady her, had gripped her tightly, had drawn her back against him. The uprushing of all the confusions that she had thought put forever behind her. Then that sense of outraged convention, the old dread of being seen with him, the fear of scandal that might so easily and casually blast her life and turn the new brilliant promise of success into the most pitiless of failures. . . . The fact that here they were, he and she, together in a sleeping car, bound for the West, had suddenly rushed upon her with a new and blinding force. The thought, too, that this very car was bearing him straight to that other woman who publicly asserted her right to him. She had become suddenly afraid of him; afraid of that hostile driving thing men call Society; even afraid of herself. How could she face her mother and sister and brother! She had left New York full of new aims and high hopes and exuberant happiness. . . . So, once again she had lost herself in a very panic of the soul. She had begged him to help her by leaving her—heedless of everything on earth but the dangers she felt—heedless, quite, of him.

And he had left her, dropping off the train somewhere in Pennsylvania. She could see him now—standing there among the shadows of a station platform, gripping the handle of his suit-case with one lean hand, his umbrella with the other—a rather gaunt man, slightly bent but strong; a white face, almost a gray face; deepset eyes, that

had always looked tenderly on her and with a haunting sorrow. . . . She had never so much as known the name of that station in Pennsylvania. She did not believe that, at the moment, he knew it either. . . . She had not seen him since. And he had not written. Not until now.

She collected her thoughts, and bent over the baby. Without conscious effort she had been holding the blanket off the baby's chest, as she had observed Moran doing. She wondered how he had happened to think of that. It was so plainly the right thing to do, once you had thought of it. . . . The baby was still sleeping.

Hilda propped her chin on her hand. In a few moments she would read that letter. When Moran should return. He would not be long. She propped her chin on her free hand, and thought very soberly.

The unexpected, if relatively faint, stirring up of that old emotional storm had brought her a sense of sheer hurt, of pain. She did not like to be stirred in that way. It shook the foundations of her life. And it was so useless. Even if Doreyn were free, she felt that she could never again turn toward him. Why, since the first great temptation to give herself, her whole mature life had really begun, had settled its direction. The impressionable girl he had known, aquiver with ideals and romantic impulses, had died. Succeeding that child had grown up a sophisticated woman—a practical woman, of fixed habit. It was unthinkable now that she should give up her independent personality and mold her life upon the life of a man. The wonderful power of youth to idealize and worship the man had died when the girl in her died. She knew men too well now. And the knowledge had embittered her.

Even if she could go back to that stirring love of her

fresh young womanhood, Doreyn was not free. There was his wife, his home—and the two girls. They must be grown now, those girls. She remembered them, in another vivid picture, as they sometimes came into the office. He was always gentle with them. It had bewildered her to think of that side of his life. Sometimes it had tortured her. For it was always between them. It had been the unspoken cause of most of the queer sudden quarrels they had had—sudden clashings of two tortured natures.

No, she couldn't take up the old threads. Not ever.

But if that was so, why should they still be here, in her life, tugging pitilessly at her heart? Why should her past have this power to torment her, to rouse old emotions and taunt her with visions of the impossible!

No, she could never resume those feelings. She might weaken, undermined by these deep human hungers that came. She might have to have love. It was quite possible. It happened to many, many women. To most, in fact. But if she should weaken, and marry, there would be no blaze of romantic feeling. She felt pretty certain of this. If anything, it would be a need—at best, a friendly arrangement of lives. And with some mature man. She certainly could not permit her life to be torn to pieces by an exacting emotional boy.

Further, it would never be with Doreyn. That experience had been wonderful and, at times, dreadful. It had been the one great stirring influence in her life. But it belonged in the past. . . . No, she would have to begin fresh with some one—some one who did not know her too well, so that there might at least be little surprises, and the possibility of growth; some one with whom she had never exchanged reproaches, and toward whom she had never been bitter. To keep as near the surface of life

as possible, even in matters of the emotions—that was the thing now.

She wondered, with a sudden inner tightening, if she was too old to have a baby. Thirty-two—surely not. Even thirty-three or four. Though it would be very hard, doubtless.

She was thinking in circles. She felt bewildered. And the hurt was still there. For years she had worked hard, hard, to cover that hurt. During the early years of her success, she *had* covered it. She had been able almost to smile at it. But now that the thrill of success had tamed down into routine, now that she was tired and unable to work, here was the hurt, apparently as strong as ever, leaping at her. . . . He had succeeded. And without her. At the thought she compressed her lips.

She felt a draft of air. She reached over for one of the pillows and put it back of the baby's head.

Her thoughts were still running loose. She recalled Moran's little discourse on bees, and the queer analogy it had started in her mind. She dwelt on that analogy. She had never been given to theorizing or generalizing; but now she thought—

"I'm a good deal like that worker bee Blink talked about. The unsexed female that does nothing but work." A bitter half-smile flickered about her mouth; then it died, and her eyes became wet and big. "That's it, I guess. The unsexed females that do the work. Come to think of it there are lots of women like me. Thousands and thousands. Of course. The business world is full of them. And mostly they just work and work until they die; or give up and marry for a home and a living. They don't have love or babies—or if love does come, it's likely to be wrong, just a demoralizing thing. But what can you ex-

pect, if you let thousands of them go into business, and work with men, and help them day by day—big men, too. Things are bound to happen. And then it's wrong, and there's trouble—for the girl. Always trouble for the girl. The only possible way she can save herself is by giving up her independence. And yet her independence is all she has. Then it is like the time Blink spoke of, when there isn't enough work for the bee, and she gets demoralized and tastes honey, gets drunk on honey, takes to fighting and robbing other hives. . . ."

Her thoughts were arrested. They had turned, sharply and unexpectedly, on herself, on her tired, bewildered self.

"Why, that's me," she breathed. "With the work gone —demoralized—tasting honey—getting drunk on honey—no good for anything but work, no good without it—taking to robbing other hives . . ."

She stared down at the sleeping child. Suddenly she bent over and clasped her hands, tenderly, carefully, at the edge of the pillow behind the little dark head. Sobs came. She fought them back. Her tears fell hot into the folds of the blanket.

"Oh," she whispered, "we're going to save you, Little Blessing! And I'll keep you. Yes, I'll keep you for my own. I'm going to give you a home, and send you to school, and buy you pretty little frocks, and tie ribbons in your hair. If I can't have love—if it's too late for love—perhaps they'll let me have you!"

She seemed to hear the door open. But her thoughts raced on:

"Yes, I'm a worker bee. I've lost my work, and I'm demoralized. I'm tasting honey. Maybe I'm honey drunk right now. If I am, I can't help it. It's not my fault. I've done my best, worked my hardest—and I've got to

live my life. One way or another, I've got to live my life!"

A big hand settled lightly on her shoulder. She felt that hand, with a dangerous intensity, in every nerve-fiber in her body. She stirred—hesitated—stirred again—then nervously shook the hand off. This sort of thing could do no good—it merely added to the difficulties, made it harder to think. And think she must, somehow, if she was not to lose her grip altogether.

She looked up at him through her tears, at her big steady helper who on only one brief occasion had seemed to be thinking of himself. Then, before she could realize what she was about, she had caught at his hand, and gripped it.

"Oh, Blink," she whispered, "we've got to save her! We've *got* to!"

"I think," said he, "that we will. Nothing happened, has there?"

Hilda shook her head. "No, she has been just like this. I can hardly believe it. Isn't it wonderful!"

He hung his hat, as usual, on the bed-post; then, with the hand she had left to him, fumbled in the pocket of his overcoat and produced a small parcel. "Here's Adele's medicine, Hilda. Better give it to her right away."

XII

IN WHICH HILDA PERCEIVES, JUST AHEAD, THE CROSSROADS OF LIFE, AND SPECULATES RATHER DEEPLY. ALSO THERE IS A SMALL CONFLICT IN HER ROOM, WON, AS IT HAPPENS, BY ADELE

SHE took the medicine in to Adele, and gave it to her. When she reentered her own room, Moran was sitting quietly by the baby.

Hilda glanced once, then again, at the unopened letter, lying there on the chair by the door.

She picked it up, and with an effort at an offhand manner walked to the window with it. She stood looking down into the street, tapping the envelope lightly against her finger-tips. Then she opened it.

There was his name, at the bottom—curiously enough, written in full—Harris Doreyn. She wondered why he had done that. Did he suppose she would ever forget that old familiar "H"—or a single stroke of his hand, for that matter? Still, she liked this better. For there was nothing furtive about that full name. And he had always hated the furtive as much as she. Perhaps he had done this to show her that there was no shame in his heart. . . . Though doubtless she was making too much of a small matter.

The date was three weeks old. He was wondering, perhaps, why she had not replied.

The letter itself consisted of thirteen words—"May I have a talk with you? I will come to New York."

That was all. She read these words a number of times. Then she carefully refolded the paper, and slipped it back into the envelope.

She might cable him, so that he would understand the long delay. But no—that would suggest eagerness. She simply must not do anything that would stir him or stimulate a new friendship between them.

She could not write refusing to see him. That would be a flat discourtesy. But she knew now that she didn't want to see him. It might stir up again in both the curious passion that vibrated so swiftly between quarrels and love. An utterly unreasonable, fierce passion theirs had become before she broke off.

To write now, after this delay, agreeing to a meeting, seemed somehow to be making too much of it. If she could have received the letter at her desk in New York, two days after he had written it, she might have replied directly but casually, arranged for the talk, and got it over with. But the delay had the effect of intensifying the situation.

She wondered what definite thing he could have to say after all these years.

Then she wondered if she could answer him at all. It seemed to her that she could not. She watched the people passing in the street, and the automobiles.

It was rather odd that she should be considering the matter so coolly, after the emotional upset of the last hour or so. Apparently she had spent her feelings on the unopened envelope. It was the sight of his writing, after five years, that had stirred her. To read the letter and come to a half conclusion regarding it proved a relief, if anything.

No, she wouldn't answer it. It seemed too bad; but she couldn't.

She turned, and looked back into the room. The baby was still asleep. Moran sat motionless, chin on hand, carefully holding up the blanket. Her heart warmed toward him. She came slowly back and stood by him.

He looked up. "She's going fine," he said, very low. "This is the nearest thing to a rest she's had in days."

Hilda nodded. Her eyes filled. Moved by a swift warm impulse she rested her hand on his shoulder. "You're very good, Blink," she murmured.

Then, in a sudden small panic, she moved away and busied herself folding and laying away the little garments that Adele had washed during the morning. But Moran made nothing of her action.

They had dinner together, the three, in Adele's room.

The baby became restless during the evening, and coughed a good deal.

Moran went out at nine for his evening run. Hilda thought it was on his tongue to suggest that she accompany him. But instead, after gazing thoughtfully at her for a moment, he looked down at the wailing little one and then went alone.

At about ten o'clock the baby exhibited signs of some real distress. Hilda saw that Adele had fallen asleep, and softly closed her door. With the possible recurrence of the afternoon emergency in mind, she started a pail of water heating over the alcohol lamp.

At ten-thirty Moran came in, ruddy and fresh from his exercise. He brought a sense of the outdoor breeze with him.

"I'm not going to let you sit up late," said Hilda, immensely relieved to have him there; "but stay a little while, if you can."

"Of course," said he; and dropped cap and sweater on a chair.

He wore the soft shirt, open at the neck, that she had seen him wear before. It clung to his great chest and his back. She could even see the pink of his skin, and the play of vigorous, flexible muscles.

"You'd better put your sweater on, Blink," she said. "You're all wet."

"Yes, so I am." He stood erect, inflated his chest, and rubbed it and beat it. He was innocent of any sense of effect. Hilda watched him. "It seemed so warm here when I first came in."

"Of course," she replied. "You've been running. It isn't warm at all. Both windows are wide open."

He sat down by the baby, and sobered as he watched her.

Hilda tested the water with her finger. Then she heard the baby coughing, rather faintly, and making another odd sound. She turned swiftly, and met Moran's gaze. Anxious, she raised her eyebrows.

He nodded. "This is the way it started before, Hilda."

"All right," said she, with a sudden businesslike manner. "The water is nearly hot enough. Get the tub, Blink —and a towel. No, that towel isn't dry yet. You'll find another in the washstand drawer. Lay it out on the bed."

She prepared the water in the tub; saying simply, "All right, Blink." It was better for him to bring the baby— he was so strong, and his hands were so steady and sure.

Once again he held the child in the warm water, while Hilda stood by with strained anxious face. The treatment had the same effect as before. The baby quieted, and finally fell asleep, wrapped in the blanket on the bed. Hilda found a way to arrange the blanket so that it was not necessary to hold it up; then drew the armchair to the bedside and

dropped into it. For a little while they were silent, Moran leaning over the foot of the bed. Both watched the baby.

Hilda reflected on the extraordinary instinct that led this hardly human bit of life to fight so desperately for its breath. "Why," she speculated, "are we so eager to live—even before we can think at all? What is it that drives us so desperately forward, through everything? Suppose I were the sick one—I wonder if I would try so hard to live. I wonder."

She thought of her mother's long struggle; then of Margie, and her fresh young enthusiasm—Margie, who had not been forced out early to earn a living, thanks to Hilda's own success, who thought that love was everything, who was living in a wonderfully impossible dream world.

She held up her wrist and looked at her watch.

"Goodness, Blink," she said, "it is after half past eleven! You must go right now."

"How about you, Hilda—aren't you going to bed?"

"How can I?" She shrugged her shoulders, and looked at the mite of a baby that now occupied the bed, exactly in the middle.

He glanced toward the sofa. "You could lie down."

"No, I'll sit right here, Blink. I shall probably fall asleep in the chair. Oh, I'll get some rest all right. And then I can hear her if she stirs."

"I think," said he, "that we can put her back in the basket without waking her up."

Hilda shook her head. "I'd rather not chance it."

"Then," said he, "suppose I lie down here, on the sofa. Then, if anything happens I'll be right here. You can just wake me up."

She compressed her lips. "No," she said, more stiffly. "I want you to go—please."

Her head settled against the chair-back. He was still there, leaning on the foot of the bed. She was rapidly becoming drowsy. She smiled a little, and glanced up at him.

"I don't believe I shall ever again have trouble sleeping," she murmured. And then added: "Please go, Blink."

Then her eyes closed, and her head drooped a little to one side. She brought it up with a jerk. She felt that she ought to resist this drowsiness.

She woke with the uncomfortable feeling that she had been sleeping in her clothes. For a little time she considered this.

There was something odd about it. She was not in bed. Come to think of it, she could not remember going to bed. Her eyes opened, then blinked at the shaded light. So it was not yet morning. It seemed to her that she could hear low voices.

She *was* dressed. And she was lying on the sofa, covered with the heavy red comforter that usually lay, folded into a fat triangle, against the footboard of the bed. She wondered how she had come here. She looked at her watch. It was just after two o'clock. And there certainly were voices. She listened. Adele was speaking. Or it sounded like Adele, very hoarse—she was suppressing a cough now, trying to keep very quiet. Yes, it was Adele.

Then a man replied. It was Blink, of course. Apparently they were right here in the room, those two. Which was odd. Her mind was working rather slowly. She was not fully awake, of course. That was it—she wasn't really awake. She wondered again how she had come here to the sofa.

Adele ought not to be here. The girl was just about down sick. And she hadn't the remotest idea as to taking

proper care of herself. "She's perfectly crazy, that child," thought Hilda—"perfectly crazy."

Suddenly she remembered sitting in the armchair by the bed, and growing drowsy. The picture came to her mind of Blink leaning soberly over the foot of the bed. It was a symbol of his extraordinary steadiness and devotion, that mental picture. It was pleasant to lie languidly here and think of him.

There had been something else—something unusual, and distinctly depressing. She tried to recall it.

Then she remembered that, too—the letter from Harris Doreyn.

Her first judgment had been right; she couldn't answer that letter. No use reopening the dead past. No use grappling again the old dilemma. He would be hurt. But even that would be better than a new struggle with that dreadful dilemma. There had never been any way out, excepting the one way she had been driven to take, of running away from him in sheer desperation, in a panic. Perhaps it wasn't the biggest thing, but it had certainly proved the only practical thing. This way, each had gone on. He had been saved for his family. With a wreck there, always between them, they couldn't conceivably have found happiness in each other. It would have worn them out. It would have been torture. No, there was no good in reopening it. And besides all this, each had changed so; they couldn't possibly have more in common now than a half-tragic memory of the persons they once had been and the love they once had so nearly shared.

She had molded her life on other lines. It was too late now for love. Surely it was too late. She demanded much. She could give little.

There was the baby—that would help fill her life.

It would be something. Though vague difficulties rose in her mind after this thought.

The voices were going on. It seemed to her that she ought to rouse herself. She was tired. Her thoughts wouldn't race like this otherwise. But something was happening, here in her room.

She remembered quite distinctly now the little scene by the bedside, up to the moment when her head had drooped and her eyes had closed. She had jerked her head up once, because it would not do to go to sleep.

But plainly she had gone to sleep. Blink had been there then, he was here now. He must have brought her himself to the sofa, and covered her with this absurd red comforter. He must have picked her right up in his arms, as he would have picked up a child, and carried her across the room. It would be nothing for him to do—literally nothing.

She felt the hot color coming into her face. It must have come about in that way. Surely, if she had walked to the sofa she would remember. He must have picked her right up and carried her in his arms—close to him. The daring thought flashed on her that it would have been wonderful had she wakened just then and found herself held close in his strong arms.

Then she fought this down. It would be better not to hold such thoughts. Were she to make up her mind to marry him—give up utterly—why, well and good! But that was a preposterous notion. That was the trouble, she thought. Unless one were willing to sacrifice completely either one's liberty or one's reputation, every warm human impulse must be ruthlessly crushed. It didn't seem fair. It made one hard and bitter to live in this way. But there was no choice. There were just three precious things for a

woman, and one of these she must give up in any case—reputation, liberty, love. She could not possibly have all three. She must be always giving up, always ruthlessly sacrificing, at least one of the precious things. Hilda had once sacrificed love for reputation. Now, narrowly as she might watch that exposed, terribly fragile thing, her good name, she was more likely to sacrifice love for liberty. For so a woman will change in only a few short years—short but hard years.

That adventurous thought flashed again—if only she had wakened! She needn't have let him know!

Again she put the thought down.

The voices rose a little.

"You run along, to bed, kid." It was Blink speaking. "You just stop worrying about me. The first thing you know I'll have you to sit up with, too."

"I won't do it, Blink." Adele was tearful now, as well as hoarse.

Hilda heard a chair scrape. The floor creaked. She must throw off this heaviness and get up. She could hear Adele saying:

"I tell you I won't go, Blink! You take your hands off! I—I'll fight you!—Don't you open that door! I won't, I tell you—I won't!" There was a curious sound, a sort of thump on the floor. "There now! I'm going to stay right here until you go. You oughtn't to have stayed, Blink. She oughtn't to have let you. It was selfish of her. She knows what your sleep's going to mean now. It was selfish of her. You know I can help. It's nothing but a cold. And you staying up after two o'clock! . . ."

Hilda threw off the red comforter, and swung herself into a sitting posture. She rubbed her eyes and looked.

Moran, evidently puzzled, was standing arms akimbo,

looking down at Adele. The girl was sitting on the floor, her slim back braced squarely against the door to her own room. It dawned on Hilda that Adele had not so much as put on her overcoat over her nightgown. She got to her feet and bent over her.

"Get up, child," she said. "You'll catch your death."

"I won't get up!" replied Adele, in a blaze of rebellion. "Not until Blink goes."

Hilda, perturbed, glanced appealingly at him, indicating with a nod the hall door.

Blink seemed to be thinking it over. He did not move.

"Please go," said Hilda.

"How about you, Hilda?" said he. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, with compressed lips and a little flash in her eyes. "Please go."

"Of course," said he, in an exasperatingly matter-of-fact tone. "You can go to sleep again. You'll hear if the baby wakes up."

She nodded.

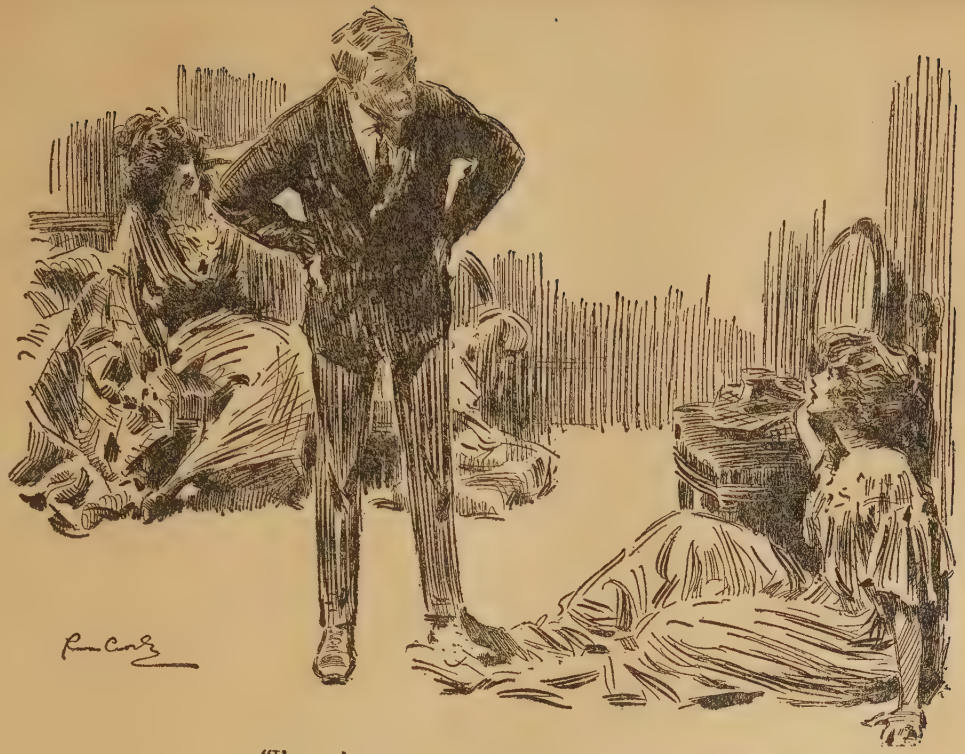
"And then you can get this kid to bed, too," he added.

For the third time she nodded. Then Blink said good night and tiptoed out.

Adele waited until she heard him open his door down the hall and close it after him; then she got up.

"Now, you go straight to bed, child," said Hilda.

Adele opened her door; but hesitated and confronted Hilda. "You oughtn't to have done it, Hilda," she said, with infinite reproach that was tempered only by her honesty. "Can't you see he's got to have his sleep? It means everything, Hilda—everything! And what's a little sleep to you and me! . . . If baby wakes up, you call me. I'll put on my coat—and my stockings and shoes if you say so. It isn't going to hurt me. Just so as you don't call him!"



"I'm going to stay right here until you go!"

"I won't call him," said Hilda, grimly.

"You'll leave the door open, Hilda?"

"Yes, I'll leave the door open. You go to bed."

Adele, using her handkerchief, obeyed.

Hilda, staring awake now, bent over the baby for a long moment. It was a relief to find her still resting comfortably. There appeared to be a real gain here.

Then she went over to the window, and stood gazing out at the sleeping city.

Never in her life had she felt quite as she felt now. That ignorant girl, living here off her bounty, had called her selfish—and with some appearance of justice. She couldn't think this out now. Without anything like anger toward the girl, she could only feel the sting of it. For she *had* been thinking of herself.

She leaned on the railing. It was warmer to-night, not so raw and chill as it had been; a mild winter night in Paris. If Adele had been rebellious, so was she, in her own way, rebellious now. An old hopeless love had been stirred within her and brought again to vivid life. And a new half-love had chosen this occasion to catch her bewildered spirit.

"Why shouldn't I think of myself!" she breathed, audibly, standing alone there in the long window. "Why shouldn't I! And why must I always look years and years ahead! How do I know what lies ahead! . . . I'll stop it. I'll let it all go, and just think of now. I've been cheated. I have nothing to show for all these years and all this work. And here is love offered again—oh, he's impossible! He's impossible! He's only honest, and kind, and strong. That's all!"

A bitter low laugh came.

Then she smiled, more softly. She was wishing again

that she could have wakened for just one wonderful moment to find herself held securely in those strong arms, close against that wonderful body. Oh, for strength! She was tired of giving out strength to others—to her subordinates, to the business itself, to her mother and Harry and Margie. More than anything else in the world, at this moment, she wanted to lean on a strong arm, to give up.

She told herself that this was dangerous. Pretty soon she would stop thinking about it. This queer new environment had caught her up for the moment; that was all. And the daylight would bring her to her senses again. Partly, at least.

Then with this understanding that she would be sensible in the morning, she let her imagination go. She tried to think out just what she would have felt if she had found herself there in his arms. The outlines of her face softened. Her eyes grew dreamy. And a faint wavering smile hovered gently about her lips.

XIII

DISTURBING NEWS, TEMPERED BY THE PLEASANT SIGHT OF ED JOHNSON

THEN, just as Hilda was nearest to yielding to the influence this man had begun to exert over her personal life, there came changes that affected radically the routine and the spirits of the little group of Americans at the Hotel de l'Amerique.

Moran had understated the extent of the training that would have to precede his approaching conflict with the great Carpentier. Henry Huybers, his manager, had views on that subject, it appeared. Blink was to leave for the country at once, or as soon as suitable training quarters could be secured, and trainer and sparring partners engaged. At the outside, he could be with them only a few days longer. And busy days.

Hilda frequently heard voices in his room, though she saw none of the eager, rather excited men that came and went. Moran was out a good deal, too; and when he did appear, was preoccupied. It was plain that he had suddenly become the center of a whirlwind of public attention as well as of almost frantic negotiations and preparations. Hilda perceived that the great match was to be a strain even on the spirit of this surest, solidest of men. And she had to struggle against some resentment of the fact. Fortunately, the baby was beginning to get better; but something was suddenly gone out of Hilda's life, something she missed with greater intensity each day.

Adele took to watching the news kiosks and bringing home papers in which discussion of the coming match appeared prominently among the important news of the day. Most of these advance comments Hilda could read only in disconnected phrases. Adele, it now appeared, had picked up more French than she.

Then, a few days after this excitement had got well under way, the English and French sporting weeklies made their appearance, carrying pages of padded descriptions of the two great fighters, full accounts of their ring careers, and many drawings and photogravures. Hilda came in from a lonely walk one afternoon and found Adele pouring over the first of these weeklies to appear on the boulevards, the one called *"La Boxe et Les Boxeurs."*

Triumphant, Adele closed the cover and held it up before her. There was their own Blink in ring costume—short trunks, socks and light canvas shoes. He was represented as crouching a little forward, arms extended in a characteristic attitude of defense, light fighting gloves curled about the clenched fists. And it was the real Blink; no doubt about that. Hilda caught her breath; then, to cover her momentary confusion, laughed and made an effort to snatch the paper from Adele's hand. But the girl put it behind her, and retreated with it into her own room. There she must have hidden it, for when Hilda sat with her, a little later, it was not to be seen. And several hours elapsed before Hilda could make an occasion to slip out, hunt up a kiosk, and buy the paper for herself from a fat, wrinkled French woman, who struggled bravely with the impulse to smile over Hilda's pronunciation of the name.

That evening, after Adele had fallen asleep, Hilda got it out and studied it. Yes, there he was; every whit as beautiful as her imagination had pictured him; wide shoulders,

deep chest, body tapering down to a slim waist and narrow hips, legs almost slim. He was more slender than she would have supposed. "It's his big shoulders and the depth of his chest that give him that stocky look in his clothes," she mused. "And then, too, he says that he is heavier now. It is a perfect body—beautiful!"

And this perfect body was not over-muscled. She could see little ridges and rows of muscle, and ropes of it curving down over his shoulders and losing themselves on his solid breasts. But in the main, it was a smooth lithe body, the equipment of an active alert fighter, not at all that of a circus strong man.

She fell asleep that night, sitting back in bed, the magazine propped against her knees. She found it still there when the baby woke her at two o'clock in the morning.

The Paris *Herald,* even, turned aside from its endless lists of socially prominent travelers and its accounts of the winter sports at Murren and St. Moritz to give detailed measurements of the two great fighters, and running comments, from day to day, regarding the betting odds. Which latter at this time greatly favored the French champion, at five and four to two. Early, too, appeared lists of prominent Americans who had already announced their intention of attending the fight. Hilda was surprised and even rather oddly moved by the importance of some of the names. They were coming, these travelers, from the Riviera; from Rome and Venice; from London; from shooting preserves in England and Scotland; from Berlin, Vienna, Baden and Carlsbad. Sober manufacturers, of standing in Chicago, Philadelphia and Cincinnati, were among the earliest applicants for boxes. Many of New York's wealthiest would be at the ringside.

This, coming at the time when Hilda so keenly missed

Blink's presence in the sick room, touched her, at moments, to resentment of a sort. They were taking him away from her. More, just as she had made the admission to herself that he was "impossible," they were suddenly placing him on a pinnacle of public importance, even of a kind of fame, the like of which she, in her own business career, could never hope to win. She fell to thinking about all this, studying the *Herald* and, after the first day or so, the London dailies, several of which attached considerable importance to the match. She recalled a hundred little unselfish acts in his hour-by-hour watching over the baby and herself.

It was at one of these moments that she came upon one of the detailed studies of his physical proportions; and she read the precise measurements of his neck, chest, waist, biceps, forearm, thigh and calf, with mixed emotions. On the whole, it bothered her, this extreme public familiarity with the man's very person. Without exactly facing the fact of this little resentment within herself, she did permit herself the wish, now and then, that they would spare the public these intimate details. And then she would herself read them again and again, curiously fascinated, until she could have recited them in her sleep. And out of all these measurements she would try, in little flights of sheer feeling, to reconstruct the man she had come to know so well. But she never quite succeeded in this tax on her imagination. Which brought home to her again that she did not know Blink Moran the fighter at all. Then she would be stirred by impatience for the great night to come, when the tiger-man would emerge before her eyes. She speculated much regarding the best plan for having herself taken to the fight, two or three of which seemed feasible.

Henry Huybers finally selected quarters in a village near Orleans. Promptly the papers published pictures of the spot, of Moran in sweater and flannels running along a country road (which was distinctly not a French road) of the sparring partners, of the building in which the now famous contestant for championship honors would sleep.

There were moments when Hilda's thoughts seemed to spring away from the pressure and the excitement of this strange environment that had become so suddenly and so intensely her own. Pictures of the store would flash upon her inner eye. Some unsettled problem of the last year would reassert itself. She thought a good deal of Annie Haggerty. The thing to do, in that case, was to put her foot down and insist, should Martin continue obstinate about keeping the girl on in the store, that she be transferred to some other department—even to Martin's own office. Yes, let him take care of her himself! . . . For a year she had meant to get a new desk for herself; and a long mirror, framed to match it. It was curious how one put off these little personal matters from day to day and month to month. Even though her office was a mere cubbyhole at the corner of the fifth floor, behind the stock cabinets, there was no reason against making it as cozy and attractive as might be.

During this same period she received a long letter from her mother; and she passed an entire day in considering it and framing a reply. Margie's affairs were progressing—she was now as good as engaged. Her mother was greatly agitated, as much by her own dread of being left alone, now that Harry was ready for college, as by her genuine fear that the girl was making a doubtful choice of a husband. Hilda considered all this very coolly. Indeed the letter

brought her, for the moment, back to her normal life; and she seemed to feel the familiar home burdens settling again on her shoulders.

The training party, trailed by a surprisingly large number of newspaper men and camp followers more difficult of classification, was to leave on a Friday for the country. Late on Thursday afternoon, Moran tapped at Hilda's door, and in response to her soft-spoken, "Come in," entered and leaned in the fashion which had grown familiar to her on the foot of the bed.

"You look a little tired," said she—"or nearer it than I've ever seen you."

"I know, Hilda. This working up a fight is a real job, you know. Between fights I always forget how much of a job it is."

"You are getting very famous, Blink."

"Oh"— he seemed to find it necessary to stop and consider this—"you mean the press stuff?"

She nodded; and smiled a little, with bright eyes. "Of course. You know what I meant."

"You mustn't take that stuff seriously," said he, soberly. "It's what Henry is best at—publicity."

"Oh," she mused, "I hadn't thought of that. So he works it up."

"Yes—Henry and Carpentier's people. And it's the game to play me a little harder than they play him. You see, I'm not so well known as he is, and so the more they work up my side of it the evener the fight will look beforehand. And it helps in the betting, too."

"You are destroying my illusions, Blink," she complained, half-smiling.

"But if you're a business woman, Hilda, you ought to know how these things are done."

"I suppose so." She sighed. "I do know it, as far as the business world is concerned. But the boxing world is not so familiar to me."

"Well," said he, shortly, "that's just as well. Because it is a good deal worse."

"You don't mean that it's crooked, Blink?"

"A lot of it is."

"But not your fight."

He shook his head. "The fight'll be square, Hilda. No fixing there. I wouldn't fight him if I had to sell out. I'm going to put him to sleep if I can."

Hilda drew in a quick breath. He said this very quietly; but she had never before caught the strong purpose of the man to quite this extent. The thought that he—her Blink—was going into that square "ring," beneath the blazing white lights and before thousands of flushed shouting spectators, with the deliberate intention of never leaving it until the great Carpentier should lie inert on the canvas floor, brought a thrill that was partly sheer excitement and partly something very like horror. There was bewilderment in it, too. He looked so steady and quiet as he said it. He was so much the steady man who had had the freedom of her room at all hours of the day and night without ever taking an unfair advantage, who had actually dressed and undressed the baby with those big and, as it suddenly seemed to her, murderous hands. Perhaps, as he had said, it was just business. Yet, with all her worldly experience, she found herself unable to understand it.

He was continuing:

"You see, there *is* a good deal that's what you might call crooked in all this press stuff and the betting. Henry is dippy about that side of it. He'd bet his grandmother's last pair of shoes on a fight. Just a born gambler. But

he's a hustler, and as long as he doesn't interfere with my side of the job, I let him alone. My business is fighting. If I do that job well, it's enough for one man."

She mused over this.

"I wanted to ask you," said he then . . . "take a little walk with me to-night, will you?"

She hesitated.

"It'll be the last time—for a while, Hilda. Maybe it'll bring me luck."

Then she slowly nodded; puzzled, but with composed features. She was even a thought nettled. Surely no man could have appeared less the lover than he appeared at this moment.

"I'll look in about eight," said he. "It'll be hard to get away from that bunch, but I'll shake them somehow."

"All right," she replied. "I'll be ready."

He turned to go; then stopped short and felt in his pocket. "Got a letter for you," he explained. "I was near the American Express, and inquired."

Then he left, and she opened the letter. It was an invitation to dine on the following evening—very formal, written in the stilted English of old M. Armandeville, and signed with his name.

It was annoying. He had never done exactly this with her. There seemed to be an assurance about it. She thought it over very soberly. When she went down to dinner, it still held her thoughts. She was glad when eight o'clock came; and on the stroke Blink, in a newly pressed and creased blue suit and loose top coat, swinging his *"canne Anglaise."* It was a distinct relief to step out by his side along the quiet street and wonder what thoughts and emotions were stirring behind his immobile face.

They walked, as they had walked so many times, through to the Champs Elysées, out to the Arc de Triomphe, and down the slope to the Seine. He was in one of his silent moods. Which was just as well, she felt.

He led her across the river, this time, over the Pont d'Iéna and they walked clear around the Champ-de-Mars along the wide gravel paths. The Eiffel Tower soared above them, so high that it lost itself in the night sky. The lights twinkled about them. Occasionally they could hear the wireless, far overhead, scratching out long jerky messages into the night.

When they were near the farther end of the park he pointed over toward the big amusement wheel that was faintly outlined against the sky, on their right.

"The Grand Roue," he said. "That's where I had my first fight in Paris. Against the middleweight they call Balzac."

"Did you beat him, Blink?" she asked, in a dreamy voice.

"They called it a draw—a *'match nul.'* I've learned a few things about the business since then."

He was silent for a long time after this. She felt that he had something on his mind, and simply waited for him to say it in his own time. She was inclined to think that it would not be another proposal of marriage. It would not be like him to approach that subject again until the intense preoccupation of the fight should be over with. He was not given to dwelling on more than one subject at a time. When he did speak, it became evident that she was reading him accurately.

"I'm glad you felt like coming out to-night, Hilda."

"I'm glad, too."

"I shan't likely see you again."

"Oh, you won't be coming to town while you are training?"

"No. Hardly. I'll stay right there. And anyway, I don't think I'd want to see you."

She waited for the explanation that she knew would come.

"You see, Henry is going to put me through a harder lot of work than I had figured on. And I suppose he's right. Anyway, I've agreed to it. He says I owe it to myself and him to make my big stand right now. That's why we're going off so far—so the Carpentier crowd won't know how seriously we're taking it. Henry says we stand a good chance to slip over something really big."

He walked on in silence, apparently thinking over this prospect; then continued:

"I've been through this thing before, and I know what it means. It's hard work, Hilda. They'll run me off my legs, and give me dry food, and fight me every day." He whistled softly. "Henry has persuaded Al Banning to come down as one of my sparring partners. I don't know whether you know what that means."

"I don't, Blink."

"Well, Al is the hardest hitting light heavyweight in the world to-day. Got tough hands, you know. Never has been known to hurt those hands. If he was only a better boxer and had a defense he would be champion until he died of old age. So one of the things I've got to do—every day, mind—is to stand up there and try to block Al's wallops—and not with my chin either. Then he has got Young Jimmy Clabby to work up my speed and my judgment of distance, and a couple of French youngsters for me to punch around and practise my left on. . . . Here's

what I meant about not wanting to see you, Hilda—after about one good week of this work I'll begin to get ugly. Oh, you needn't laugh. I will. I've been through it, you see, and I dread it. There isn't any fun in it at all. They drive you something fierce. They just work to turn you into a hard, fast fighting machine, and it isn't a pretty job to watch."

"Well," said Hilda, trying to talk like the efficient business woman she certainly had been, once upon a time, "that sounds like practical sense, if fighting is your business. And anyway, Blink, you would have no time to think about your friends. They won't expect it, if they *are* friends."

His only reply to this was, "Oh, I'll be thinking about you, all right, Hilda."

They had walked all the way back to the Quai and turned toward the Pont de l'Alma before either spoke again. Then he said:

"Here's what I'm really getting at, Hilda—Are you coming?"

"To the—the fight, you mean, Blink?"

"Yes."

"Well"—she hesitated a second, then rushed on with an emotional force in her voice that surprised herself—"well, I don't believe that you, Blink, and Al Banning, and your Young Jimmy Clabby together are big enough to keep me out!"

He took this little outbreak quite impersonally. "How are you coming, Hilda? Do you want me to get you seats?"

"Why, yes, Blink! That would be more than good of you. It—" She hesitated. Little possible awkwardnesses flashed into her mind. Suppose she were to arrange the thing so that Ed Johnson or—she had considered this—Abraham Kutzner should act as her escort. Would it be

sense of freedom and power. And freedom and power are pleasant things.

"Blink," she said—her mood had changed; they were crossing the Pont de l'Alma now—"tell me something. Have you heard anything lately from the—the baby's mother?"

"Nothing very definite. Millicent said the other day she seemed to be getting a little better."

"Oh!" said Hilda, "she is!" And added, as an afterthought, "That's good."

"Yes, she has had a mean time of it."

Hilda was thinking deeply. "Well, tell me, Blink, do you think—look here, wouldn't she be glad to place her in a good home—I mean, where she would be sure of the best care and training, good food, an education, all that?"

He walked on for a long moment without replying. Then he said:

"I don't know."

"But she can't very well keep her, Blink."

"Why not?"

"Well—every one would know about her—she wouldn't have a chance—"

"If you mean because the parents weren't married, you know the French people don't take that as hard as we do."

Hilda found herself momentarily confused, and something cast down. There was opposition here.

Blink went on:

"I'd sort of hate to see you do it. On your account, you know; not so much on hers. That is, if she was willing."

"Why, Blink?"

"Well—you know how people are. They'd talk about you."

"Suppose I didn't care what they said."

"Then that would be just as hard on the kid, wouldn't it?"

"Oh!" said Hilda. Evidently this little problem lay too close to her own feelings to permit of calm reasoning. She decided to drop the subject and think it out by herself. She did not wish to be opposed—not now. So they walked on in silence to the hotel, across the office, up the stairs and along the corridor.

But before they reached her door, he caught her arms and drew her back.

It was curious; but something in the way his hands closed about her arms, something in the momentary brushing of her shoulder against his coat, brought up again the vivid picture of Doreyn and herself, in the vestibule of the Chicago train, between the diner and the sleeping car. He had drawn her back in just that way, excepting that Doreyn's hands had gripped her with a sudden intensity that had vibrated through them both like an electric spark. And that had happened five years ago! In the mere second or so before Moran spoke, she passed through an extraordinary little rush of emotions. She wondered at her own helplessness in the current of these sudden vivid uprushes of memory. She even found time to wonder, swiftly, if it was not a sign that her youth had passed, this recurrence of past emotions in place of the working and living constantly in the future that she had always supposed the normal drift of life. The past, that she had thought dead, was suddenly alive, amazingly alive.

It held a power over her. At moments like these it seemed to have her in a grip that was almost disheartening.

Before she could collect her thoughts sufficiently to shake off his hands, he released her, saying simply:

"Wait a minute, Hilda."

He plunged his hand into his overcoat pocket, and produced a small parcel—unmistakably from a jeweler's shop.

Hilda took it in her hand, then looked up inquiringly.

"I wanted to give you something nice, Hilda," he said, rather laboriously. "You might give your other one to Adele, or somebody."

She stripped off the paper and opened the box. Within lay a small bracelet watch of heavy gold.

So he had observed her possessions, and thought out her needs. The wrist watch she had been wearing was a gun metal affair held on by a leather strap.

The color came rushing back to her cheeks and the dancing light to her eyes. She caught at his hand—his left hand, as it happened—and gave it an impulsive squeeze.

"You shouldn't have done it, Blink," she said.

"I wanted to give you—"

"Yes—never mind. I'll keep it, and wear it. Thank you, Blink. You're a dear. . . . I'm going in now. Good night. Shall I see you in the morning?"

"Not likely. We go on an early train."

"Well, good luck then! And don't let them make you too ugly, because you've got to take me to the fight. And you must be nice."

"Now, Hilda, are you sure you're—"

She reached up, her face alight with that daring mischievous smile—all woman, now—and stopped his mouth with her hand. He caught it, pressed it there, kissed it.

Then she jerked it away, slipped swiftly into her own room, closed the door, and for a moment leaned against it until the tumult in her breast could quiet down. Fortunately Adele did not see. She was sitting in her own room with the connecting door ajar.

Hilda went to sleep that night with the new watch on

her wrist. In the morning she gave the other to Adele; who thanked her, and then, instead of wearing it, put it away in a drawer of her chiffonier.

At noon Adele went to the American Express for her, and returned with a note from Ed Johnson, penciled on a memorandum slip that bore the imprint of Armandeville et Cie. There was no stamp on the envelope. Either Ed had sent it by messenger or had left it himself at the "M to Z" window.

"Dear Hilda," he had written. "Have just arrived in Paris. Want to see you right away if convenient. Will look in at American Express about four this afternoon. Also later, around six. Have had four weeks of toughest traveling in world. Those Wop railways—can you beat them! Between you and I, I'm about ready to head for home and stick there a good long while."

Hilda gave this characteristic note a good deal of thought during and after the luncheon hour. It was a little hard to understand—Ed usually addressed her at the big hotel on the Rue de Rivoli. And he was taking it for granted that she was in Paris, despite her carefully planted explanations to the contrary. They must have given him this understanding at Armandeville's. Yes, surely, because M. Armandeville had asked her to dine with him. He *knew* that she was in Paris.

It was disturbing. Plainly, the sooner she could see Ed, the better. Before half past three she was dressed and on her way, though it was hardly a ten-minute walk to the American Express.

She found a chair in an inconspicuous corner of the big mail room on the second floor. The last occupant of that chair had been immersed in American newspapers;

the large writing table at her elbow was heaped high with them.

A Chicago paper lay on top. She reached to pick it up, then withheld her hand. Almost certainly it would have a big advertisement of the Doreyn Company spread over a half or three-quarters of one of the inside pages. Even in the breezy satisfying years of her early success she had avoided these advertisements. They stirred her uncomfortably.

She pushed the paper off the heap and it fell to the floor, the long stick on which it was mounted striking with a loud noise. Readers and writers looked up and around.

This was unpleasant too. She snatched up the next paper. It proved to be the Paris *Herald*. She opened it out, hiding behind it, and wondering why they didn't mount the papers in some way that would enable one to handle them less awkwardly.

There was the usual column about the redoubtable Blink Moran—the story of his fight, years earlier, with one Billy Papke. Moran had broken his right hand in that bout.

Hilda considered this. She recalled his picturesque description of the hard-hitting Al Banning—"Got tough hands, you know. Never has been known to hurt those hands." It had not occurred to her before that a fighter risks injury to his own hand in striking an opponent; but of course it would be so.

She read on, skimming the long list of arrivals and departures sent in from this or that hotel or city or resort. Idly she ran through the London news. So and so was at Claridge's, a few at the Carlton, a hundred or more at the Savoy.

Then came a few paragraphs of general comment. The activities of the militants were bearing disastrously on the

hotel and tourist business generally. Or else they were not. Hilda skipped over this. Her long training in the business world of men had given her much the same view of those rather violent agitators for the cause of woman as was held by the average man in the street. It made her impatient, even scornful of her sex.

Then her roving eye fell upon this—

"Mr. Harris Doreyn, of Chicago, was seen yesterday at the Savoy. He refused to be interviewed, saying merely that he had run over to England for a little rest."

She read the surprising paragraph again, without in the least believing that it was so, or even that she was really reading it, there in the paper. Four, five, ten times she read it. Then she closed her eyes, and made a deliberate effort to compose her mind. She must comprehend this fact, somehow. She opened her eyes, and read it twice again.

Finally she lowered the paper to her lap, rested her chin on her hand, and looked out the window at the greatest of opera-houses just across the street.

Harris Doreyn had come to London!

She told herself that it was absurd to yield to her agitation. He had often come to London. He must have been a hundred times in New York while she was there working briskly about the fifth floor or sitting at her desk in the corner behind the stock cabinets. More likely than not he had been in the store. Everybody came to Hartman's, one time or another. His coming to London now could have nothing to do with her—not conceivably. Yet her temples were pounding again, and she felt that miserable old congestion at the back of her head.

He often traveled abroad. She had read in a magazine sketch of him that he made travel his recreation. And four years back, when the newspapers had carried the report that his health had broken, he had gone to Carlsbad and stayed nearly a year. Then he had returned to Chicago and resumed his work.

His wife had not been with him at that time. Hilda knew this, because Mrs. Doreyn was then beginning her career as a prominent club woman, and her name had appeared as speaking here and there in the East.

She must compose herself. Ed would be coming any moment. She got up, went into the woman's rest room, and made an opportunity to confront herself in a mirror. The face before her was a tragic mask—white and cold. She took off her gloves and washed her face, rubbing it hard with her hands and then with a towel to bring up the color. Then she put on her gloves, and reentered the main room.

There was Ed Johnson—standing in the doorway near the head of the stairs. It *was* good to see him. She even smiled faintly.

He was an odd little man—short, and quite fat about the middle, but with a rather thin neck and distinctly thinnish legs. Even in his long overcoat, she caught hints of the familiar outlines. No tailor had ever succeeded in giving him the appearance of even a normal "forty stout."

He was looking anxiously about now. She could see his short red mustache bristle up nervously as he pressed his lower lip against its upper fellow. His heavy eyebrows, always arched very high, were higher than usual. His oddly prominent eyeballs stuck out farther than normal. He was a funny little man, Ed Johnson; a man of flaring enthusiasms; a man of passionate faith in the Hartman

store and, above even that, in the glove department, of which he was the head.

Hilda, her smile expanding as at the warm feeling of home, suddenly brought to her here in the heart of this bewildering Paris, stepped forward to grip his hand.

XIV

MORE DISTURBING NEWS; AND STILL MORE. A PRODIGAL RETURNS, SMOKING CIGARETTES

THEY walked over to the Café de la Paix. Curiously, Hilda found herself sitting at the same table at which she and Stanley had had their talk. But it was immensely different. Though the facts of her present life were disturbing, Ed Johnson was a rest for weary eyes. For all his age and worldly experience, Ed was astonishingly unsophisticated. She reflected, as she smilingly listened to his eager shop talk, that this was the best thing about men—some men. Despite the battering of a hostile ugly world, they manage in some way to hold their boyishness. Ed, now, was a tremendous worker, a sharp trader, at intervals a hard drinker, and, withal, an overgrown, soft-hearted child. Women were not like that.

Ed drew a handful of papers from a side pocket and ran through them.

"Got this cable from J. H.," he said. "Asks me to look you up. What's the matter, Hilda—sick?"

"I was getting close to it, Ed."

"Knocking off for a while, eh?"

She inclined her head.

"Well, I guess that's sense. I always say if you don't take the short vacations when they come you'll find yourself booked for a long one."

He paused, and dropped his eyes. Hilda wondered why he asked no questions.

"How do you stand with your work, Hilda? Anything I can do?"

"Thanks—no, Ed. I finished it up."

"Well, now I'll tell you—whatever you do, don't sit around here and worry about things at the office."

"I don't think I'm worrying, Ed. Though, of course I've never missed my spring sales before. . . ." She hesitated, and compressed her lips. A curious sensation of something very like guilt was stealing into her mind. Never before in her working life had she forgotten responsibilities as she had forgotten them lately. Now the sight of Ed, and the familiar sound of his rather high-pitched voice, was bringing them all back in a rushing tumult of mental pictures and small and large worries. Indeed, the experience was so confusing that she knew she must keep silent about it.

"Oh, they'll manage it all right," said he, cheerfully.

Still he asked no questions.

"I broke down once, you know," he went on. "Reg'lar nervous prostration. That's the time I went up to Canada for six months. Doctor told me—'Mr. Johnson,' he said, 'the minute you find you're beginning to have a good time and sort of hate to think about coming back to your desk, that means you're only just beginning to rest. It's the time you take and the playing you do *after* that,' said he, 'that counts in building you up.'"

Hilda appeared to be thinking this over. "How did your department get on without you while you were gone, Ed?" she asked. "Six months is a good while."

"Fine." Ed chuckled. "That's the year the business of the glove department gained nearly nineteen per cent.—

eighteen point eight, it was. Most we had ever gained up to that time. Took a little of the conceit out of me, that did. We're none of us indispensable, you know—nobody."

"I know," mused Hilda.

Suddenly she raised her eyes and looked straight at him.

"Look here, Ed, you knew I was in Paris—didn't you!"

"Why—yes."

"How did you know it?"

"How did I. . . . Don't know as I get you, Hilda."

"Yes, you do, Ed."

"Well, Mr. Hemstead said in his cable you'd be around here somewhere. See—here's what he says—"

Hilda waved this aside. "Did Levy tell you I was here?"

"Why—no. He said you were traveling with friends, and your address was the American Express."

"Have you seen Mr. Armandeville?"

Ed had finished his tea and lighted a long cigar. He now half-closed his eyes, and smoked in deliberate contemplation. Hilda indulged herself in the momentary wish that women were permitted to smoke cigars. It gave one an immense advantage in conversation.

"Oh, yes," he finally replied, as if he had forgotten the question and then suddenly recollected it—"I've seen Mosseer Armandeville. This morning."

Hilda waited, but Ed was again calmly occupied with the cigar. Finally she broke the silence—

"And he said I was here."

"He—oh, yes. He said he knew you were in Paris, and Levy had your address."

"What else did he tell you?"

"Not a thing."

"That question calls for an answer, Ed."

"You've got it. He didn't tell me anything else."

"But you knew I was here. You took it for granted you could reach me to-day."

Ed smoked and smoked. Once he removed the cigar, turned it up between thumb and second finger, watched the smoke curl upward, opened his mouth as if to speak, then abruptly thrust the cigar back into it and kept silence.

Hilda leaned her elbows on the table, still looking at him. He could not meet her direct gaze.

"Listen, Ed," she said. "This thing is on my mind. I gave them to understand that I would be away. But they seem to know that I'm not away. And you knew I was not."

Ed was biting into the cigar now. He again removed it, and reflected.

"Guess I'd better tell you just what was in my mind, Hilda."

"I think you had, Ed."

"Well—between you and I, it's disturbed me quite some. I didn't like the way Levy said it. He got that off, about you being away and your address being the American Express, just like the machine he is. I could tell from the look in those china blue eyes of his, that he was lying and he didn't care if I knew it. But he was expected to say that, and he said it. It was his job. So then, pretty soon, I saw the old boy himself. You see, I was some worried, having J. H.'s cable and all."

"And just what was it he said?"

"Why"—Ed had some gift of mimicry—"he says, 'Mam'zelle Veelsong she ees on Paree, but she 'ave no time for her good frien's. She do not say she ees on Paree. She say she 'ave go—vat you say—avay, ees eet not? But she 'ave not go avay, for eet ees zat I 'ave see her one time, two time, and Mosseer Kutzner he 'ave see her, and zat rascal

Levy he 'ave see her and he know much but he vill not say ze t'ing at all.' "

Hilda tried to smile. Then her lips drew together, and her brows.

"Listen, Ed," she finally remarked. "This is really pretty awkward, isn't it?"

"Why, I don't see that it is, Hilda. You've got a right to keep away from business, when you're on a vacation—"

"It isn't just that, Ed. You have already admitted that you were disturbed by the way they spoke of me. Don't forget that."

"Well—" Ed looked uncomfortable, and smoked faster.

"Mr. Armandeville sent me a note only last night asking me to dine with him this evening."

"Going to?"

"No, I haven't answered it—and shan't. But it bothered me, Ed. I've never accepted his invitations—never given him the slightest encouragement—but his note showed that he knew I was here, and the tone of it—well—it was exactly as if he thought he knew things about me that gave him the right to address me that way. I can't tell you—I tore the note up—and anyway, you're not a woman, Ed, and maybe you wouldn't have seen in his note what I thought I saw, and felt. But it hurt. And I'm afraid it's serious."

"Oh, no," said he, "better go right ahead and forget it."

"A woman can't do that, Ed."

"These Frenchmen are a lot of beasts, anyway."

Hilda said nothing to this. Ed meant to be encouraging. But he had lived too long and too deeply in that curious business region where women meet daily with men, even compete with them, on a footing of apparent equality that is really the bitterest inequality, not to know better.

Yes, Ed knew. He had seen, many a time, how ferociously the pack tears after a woman once the tongue of gossip has lashed her. He knew that men have no restraint, no chivalry, in the pursuit of a common prey. Ed himself was decent about these things. . . . Besides, it was no good reminding her that these Frenchmen were a lot of beasts when they happened to be the identical beasts with whom she must work, pretty closely, all her life, if she was to work at all.

She changed the subject. It could do no good to dwell on it—at this time, anyway. There would be time enough to worry when this gossip, whatever it might be, should reach New York and the store. Very possibly it would never reach there. For Paris, after all, was Paris.

"When did you get in, Ed?" she asked. "This morning?"

"No—yesterday. Put in the day getting Stanley Aitcheson off to Cherbourg. That's a funny thing."

"What is?" she asked. Then followed it with another question—"Is he sailing for home?"

"In the morning. Funny thing. Didn't you hear?"

"Well—no, surely not."

"He's gone plum crazy over a girl he met on the boat coming over—name of Macy—Philadelphia folks. And what do you think—those two kids were going to get married right here. Couldn't wait. Talk about big eyes and snooky ookums—It's fierce! Stanley dug up a minister yesterday—an American. If the old man hadn't come down hard, he'd have abducted the girl. But now they've agreed to wait until she gets back to New York. Stanley was only over for a week or so, anyhow. He got nervous and beat it—came here. Haven't you seen him?"

"Once—for a few minutes."

"Well, the old man told him to go back and make sure of his job. So he's gone. He's a nut, that kid."

"He writes good copy," observed Hilda.

"Between you and I, Hilda, he does. Seems like a man has to be a nut to write well, don't it! But say—the girl's a winner! Good family, I hear. And skads of money. I'm inclined to think it's a good thing. It'll steady the boy down, if anything will."

"I hope so," said Hilda, soberly.

It occurred to him then, suddenly, that there had been some vague talk about Hilda and Stanley, something about a hopeless infatuation on the part of the boy. He dropped the subject. But he could not see that the news affected Hilda. She *was* sober; but she had been a bit cut up by the gossip at Armandeville's. When she spoke again, it was on that topic.

"Ed"— she began, then paused—"Ed, I'm going to tell you what I've been doing here in Paris. It's as decent, as fine, as anything I've ever done in my life. It has done me good, already. I can check that up. I was tired and unstrung, and needed something new to interest me and rest up these old store-worn nerves. But it has been something of an adventure. It is just the kind of thing that the people we work among over here could never understand in the world. Besides I had to get away from that business crowd. As you said, a while ago, I had a right to. I haven't had any personal life for years and years—not since I was a girl, Ed. I just had to have a little. I found it. I'm living in it now. And I'm almost—well, almost happy, Ed."

He looked up, covertly, once or twice. Her color was up. And there was the flash in her gray-blue eyes that he had seen there, once in a while, when she had been stirred to

some unusual effort in the business—when, as he would phrase it, she was "putting something over." That she could on occasion put things over, Ed knew only too well. She was known to be strong in going after things she really felt she ought to have—rather self-centered; not always quick, when her spirit was roused, to see the other fellow's point of view. She would never be a good executive, as her predecessor, Mrs. Hanford, had been. Her personality was too positive. She hadn't tact enough. But she could drive herself and others. She had force as well as taste. She could buy merchandise, display it, and sell it—really sell it.

All this he knew. But to-day he caught glimpses of a new and different Hilda Wilson. She was after something; he knew that from the flash in her eyes and her high color. But with all her determination, she was softer. Right now there were tears in her eyes. And her manner of speech, while direct, straight-out, had a new touch of gentleness in it.

She leaned forward on the table, intent on her own thoughts.

"Ed, I'm living in a queer little hotel back of the Madeleine, with a girl dancer and a lot of chorus girls. And I'm taking care of a little French baby. It's been sick, Ed."

He returned her gaze, winked rapidly, and pushed up his mustache until it bristled out straight.

"Well—" said he, after a moment—"Well!"

"And I want you to come around and see her, Ed. Now, if you will. The baby, I mean. I've been dodging the Armandeville people and Stanley—everybody—because this is a personal experience, and none of their business. I told them I would be away. It begins to look now as if that

was foolish, for you see they've tripped me right there. I've felt like a criminal—furtive, sneaking. But that isn't my fault, Ed. It's because people can't understand a woman wanting to be herself, even for a few weeks. They won't let us be ourselves, you know. And I've bolted. Jumped the traces. But it has occurred to me that I can talk to you. I want you to come around. You've heard whispers of what they're saying about me. Now, come and see for yourself just the kind of fire that's under this dirty smoke."

Ed was something bewildered. But he was also flattered by her confidence.

She told him more of the story as they left the café and walked along the boulevard. Moran, however, she left out of it. If this was disingenuous, she was only momentarily conscious of the fact. That seemed, at the time, quite another matter. Ed would understand Adele and the baby, where the part played by Blink in the little ménage at the Hotel de l'Amerique might complicate the picture for him. Blink was away; Ed need know nothing about him. Unless he should stay over for the fight. At which point Hilda gave a little shrug and turned her thoughts along pleasanter lines. Certainly it was pleasant to let Ed into even a part of the story. It seemed to bring a sort of sanction into it; respectability even.

It was an extremely self-conscious Ed Johnson that followed Hilda up the red stairway and into the room at the end of the corridor. Hilda saw him cast a hesitating glance at the bed, and herself suppressed a smile. Adele was just coming in from her own room, looking wan but soft and pretty in one of Hilda's old negligee wraps. Ed's eye lighted with quick interest as he was made known to her; but he blushed faintly as he regarded her costume, and

nervously pushed up his mustache. Hilda had to ask him twice to take a chair, and when he did, he kept his hat on his knee. He did not take off his overcoat.

He sat for a little time, gazing down at the restless baby.

"She's pretty thin," he said, finally.

"She has gained eight ounces," Adele put in, with a flash of resentment that reached Hilda but not Ed.

"Yes, Ed," said Hilda, "she is gaining. She has been very ill. For a while we couldn't be sure . . . but she has been getting more good out of her food these last few days. Do you know, Ed, you've no idea how much of a job it is to work out the problem of feeding a delicate baby."

"Very likely I haven't," Ed replied. "Both my kids had good stomachs."

After a few moments of this rather stiff conversation, Hilda said, smilingly—

"Are you dining anywhere in particular, Ed?"

He was not.

"Suppose you and I walk over to Larue's or the Lucas. Say the Lucas—that is quieter, and we can chat."

Accordingly, in high good spirits, she led him over to the Boulevard Malesherbes. The presence of Ed brought back into her conscious thoughts all that had been normal in her life at the store, which had lately seemed like a queer, if long, dream. And more and more as the moments passed his presence endorsed this even queerer life at the Hotel de l'Amerique. It even—for so eagerly will a bewildered human grasp at the straws of justification—overcame for the moment the furtive fact that she was still leaving Moran out of the picture that she, with such an air of frankness, was permitting Ed to see. So she settled comfortably on one of the luxurious side divans at

the Lucas, sipped a light wine and ate well. And Ed, an hour later, grown expansive, confided to her that she was looking better than he had seen her look for six months. "You weren't so tired, Hilda," said he—"it was more like being stale. You know what I mean."

"Yes, I understand, Ed."

"You see, a girl in your position hasn't the ways of relaxing and freshening up that we men have."

Hilda smiled a faint, infinitely wise smile. "So you've discovered that fact, Ed?"

"Yes. It *is* a fact."

Hilda inclined her head.

"Queer game, anyway, this man and woman business. Between you and I, it won't ever be settled. You never can fix things where men and women are in the game together, without there'll come up something that's plum unreasonable, to mix you all up again."

"The way it is fixed now, Ed, it's pretty hard on the woman."

"I know—but what are you going to do about it! I swan, sometimes I think we'd all be happier if the women all stayed home the way they used to when we were kids."

"Or else if they take more of a hand in running the game."

Ed sputtered—"But that would be hell, Hilda—excuse me, but you see women are—"

"Hell for the men, Ed, yes. Right now it's hell for the women. Wouldn't it be fairer to distribute the hell around a little—give some to both sides?"

"But what are you going to do about the home, then? If you give women too much freedom . . ."

"I'm not going to do anything about the home." Hilda suppressed a sigh. "Ed—tell me about the store. Has

Mr. Hartman decided to build the annex through to Lexington Avenue? . . ."

Ed left her at the hotel, gripping her hand with a pressure that hurt it. He would be centered at Paris for several weeks, he said, making short trips to some of the provincial cities and one little journey over the German border.

Hilda ran almost light-heartedly up the red stairway.

She found Adele sitting in her room, holding the baby in her arms. The door into Adele's room was closed.

Hilda removed her coat and hat; then, glancing at Adele, was surprised to observe that the girl was quietly crying. At once her anxious gaze dropped to the baby; but the child was sleeping.

"What is it, Adele?" she asked. "Nothing wrong with baby?"

Adele slowly shook her head.

"There certainly is something wrong," thought Hilda. "The girl looks positively despondent."

Adele seemed to be making an effort to speak. But instead, she choked down a sob. Finally she looked helplessly toward the closed door.

Hilda followed her gaze, perplexed. Then she stood up very straight, and sniffed the air . . . It was faint, but —yes, it was unmistakable—the odor of cigarette smoke!

"What is it?" she asked. "Who is there?"

Adele said then, very low—"It's Will."

"Will Harper?"

Adele nodded.

"But he can't come here."

Adele made no reply to this.

"Is the other girl here, too—Blondie?"

Adele shook her head.

Hilda considered. "I'm afraid you'll have to ask him to leave, Adele."

"I did," said the girl. "He won't go." But after a moment she laid the baby carefully in its basket, and said—"I'll try it again."

"Has baby had her bottle, Adele?"

"Not yet. I was just going to heat the water."

Adele unlocked the door. Plainly there had been a scene of some sort. She had shut him out of Hilda's room.

She slipped into her own room, drawing the door softly to behind her.

XV

THE RETURNED PRODIGAL, SEEKING SOMETHING IN THE NATURE OF A FATTED CALF, MEETS WITH AN EXPERIENCE THAT WOULD BE AMUSING WERE IT NOT SO SERIOUS

HILDA, as she busied herself with the alcohol lamp, could hear Adele's low voice. Then his in reply. She made no effort to catch what they were saying.

Young Harper's voice was rising, however. Finally Hilda stood erect, the bottle in her hand, listening.

"Now don't you go talking that way, Adele! You act as if I'd never done anything for you. Didn't I pick you up when you was nobody, and teach you every step you know, and bring you over here—"

Adele interrupted him, still speaking very low.

"Whad 'o you mean, run away! Nothing o' the kind. You're ungrateful. That's the woman of it—'Oh, the years we waste and the tears we waste!'—Get all you can out of a man—everything he's got—his money, his steps, everything!—and then tell him you got no more use for him any more! I guess the sniveling kind can be vampires, too. Trouble with you is, you don't care a dam' for any one but yourself, Adele. You're selfish! To the marrow. You're selfish to the marrow!"

Adele spoke again. Then his voice broke out in a whining sort of anger. "Whad 'o you expect me to do? Haven't got ten francs, I tell you! How can I! Thing

to do is to get back at the Parnasse. We can pick up a living as a team. You can't do it alone—you know that! And you gotta do something, haven't you? Did you think you could live off the lady all the rest o' your life? You lived off o' me—now you're sick o' me and you think you can live off o' her. Nothing doing, I tell you! Noth—ing do—ing!"

Adele's voice rose now; tremulous with feeling.

"Oh, you'll have me put out, will you! And who's going to do it! Try that on and there'll be a fight. Right here and now. I'll meet force with force. I won't start anything, but I'll meet force with force. I s'pose you think the lady's crazy for a big scene here—melodrama stuff! Oh, say, she's just crazy about that! Help her a lot, wouldn't it, to get caught in a fight with a crowd like us!" He paused, thought of something; then his voice abruptly changed from whining to wheedling.

"Say, Adele, now try to be sensible, just for a minute. You're in soft here. You let me in on it. You gotta do the decent thing, anyhow, after all I've done for you. You can't let me starve. We'll work this out here, and by that time I'll have a job for us. You can leave that part of it to me—with my personality, I'll land something good. And while I'm thinking that over, the lady's gotta be decent to us. She don't want trouble. Not for a minute. I tell you, she's gotta act decent."

At this point, Adele apparently succeeded in quieting him. Hilda heard only a mumbling of voices. She went on now preparing the bottle.

Then Adele came in, closing the door and leaning back against it. She looked distressed and confused; but her eyes were flashing. She had to wait for her breath.

"He won't go," she whispered. "What shall we do?"

Hilda pursed her lips. "You think he really won't, Adele?"

The girl nodded. "He hasn't any money, you see. And Will's keen enough when it comes to looking out for himself."

Hilda stood still, considering this. Harper was correct enough in his reasoning; a real disturbance would be distasteful to her. Further, she did not care to involve the managers of the hotel in the matter.

After puzzling over it for a little time, she went in and talked to him herself.

He lay sprawled on the sofa and did not rise when Hilda appeared. He was very nervous; his hand shook as he lighted a fresh cigarette. His face was thin to the point of haggardness. He greeted her with eager familiarity.

"Never mind that," she said bruskly. "I heard all you said!"

"Oh!" he exclaimed, crestfallen; then, with a renewal of that weak eagerness, said—"But I didn't mean—you see, you didn't get me quite right! Now Adele—"

She quieted him with a look and a movement of her hand. "You say you won't go?"

"How can I?" He spread out his hands. "Give me time. Just the minute Adele and I—"

Hilda left the room and closed the door behind her. Adele slipped forward and locked it.

"I wish Blink was here for about two minutes!" the girl muttered.

Hilda did not reply. She walked to the window, thinking. More than before she felt disinclined to draw the hotel people into this private quarrel. For the small hotel keepers of Paris are minutely answerable to the police, and are timid. Young Harper was plainly counting on

this fact, as well as on her own vulnerability. And Blink was distinctly not here.

Her thoughts were turning toward the one man on whom it was possible to call. She pictured the fat little body and the curiously thin legs and neck. Ed was not what you would call an athlete. He would be surprised, but she was inclined to believe that he would be willing to help. For that matter, there was nothing else to do. Certainly she would not surrender Adele's room to the boy. And she could not herself undertake to put him out by force. For a moment she reflected on the extent to which her first impulsive step in the direction of personal freedom had already complicated her life. There might easily prove to be trouble for herself in making an enemy of this dissipated, nervously irresponsible boy; for he was desperate. But the alternative, to add his support to her already heavy list of expenses, was out of the question. Besides, that course would certainly lead to even deeper complications. There would be no end to it! . . . It seemed a cold-blooded act to put him out into the street. But what else?

She shrugged her shoulders. "It appears," she decided, "to be up to Ed."

Whereupon, she set about her distasteful task in determined fashion. Cautioning Adele to lock herself in, she slipped out, tiptoed down the hall and stairs, caught a taxi and rode to the Hotel Continental, where Ed always stopped.

It was nine o'clock in the evening. She noted this fact by the wrist watch Blink had given her, while she was seeking the man who would probably find difficulty in the task that Blink would dispose of, were he here, with a

quiet word. There was a chance that she would find Ed at the hotel. Paris, she knew, was an old story to Ed. Also, he had spoken of having letters to write.

Ed *was* in. He came hurrying out to the taxi—hat a little to one side of his head, overcoat on arm—in response to the penciled card she sent in.

She told him of her predicament as the taxi dashed through the Rue St. Honoré and whirled into the Rue Duphot toward the Madeleine. And Ed sat very still by her side. Though she did not look at him, she knew that his mustache was bristling.

Even when the taxi stopped at the Hotel de l'Amerique and he ceremoniously handed her out, Ed said nothing. But he was very ceremonious indeed. And she thought he was breathing rather hard. He walked beside her up the red stairway with positive solemnity, and waited, still in utter silence, while Adele let them in. Then he took off his overcoat and undercoat, and placed them, with his hat, on a chair.

Hilda had never seen those curiously protruding eyeballs bulge as they were bulging now. His color was high, and his breath short. Hilda delayed in putting away her hat and coat to cover the misgivings that suddenly assailed her. For Harper was young; and, when all was said and done, was a trained dancer of a distinctly acrobatic tendency. Should Ed prove unequal to this, for him, unfamiliar task, matters might grow very complicated indeed at the Hotel de l'Amerique.

Before she dared look at him, she caught a glimpse of Adele's face in the mirror over the washstand; and her doubts deepened. She wished Ed wouldn't take it so hard. He needn't have taken off both coats. Why, he positively

invited assault, standing there in his shirt-sleeves, his middle rounding out—she thought—like a Brownie's, and his legs so oddly, inadequately thin.

Adele would not look at him. She busied herself sewing a button on one of the baby's shirts.

"Adele," said Hilda, with some vague idea of delaying the matter, "I wouldn't try to sew in this light, child."

The girl made no reply, but stubbornly kept on.

Ed advanced into the middle of the room, looked sternly from one to the other, and cleared his throat.

"Where"— his voice was husky; again he cleared his throat—"where is he?"

The matter could be delayed no longer. Hilda indicated the locked door.

He strode toward it. He grasped the knob, turned it, and pulled—once, twice.

"It is locked," said Hilda.

"Oh," Ed replied, "of course. Yes, of course."

He turned the key. Adele lowered her sewing to her lap and watched him. Hilda followed him to the door as he opened it and strode into the next room. She felt a perverse impulse to laugh.

Ed went as far as the geographical center of the room, rested a hand on the foot of the bed, and looked down at the reclining figure on the sofa.

Will Harper, for his own part, looked up at Ed in frank surprise, and inhaled a long breath of cigarette smoke. He too had removed his coat, though with the different motive of comfort.

Ed cleared his throat.

Harper held his cigarette between two nicotine-stained fingers and looked across it at the fat little man with prominent eyeballs and, at the moment, a red face.

It was Harper who broke the silence, saying—

"Well, well! Where do you come in?"

"Never mind that," Ed replied. "You get out."

Harper inhaled again, meditatively. His gaze drifted past the invader toward the doorway, now partly blocked by Hilda, as if studying the enemy's strength. Then, reasonably sure that he had only the little man to contend with, he replied—

"Nothing doing."

"You get out!" Ed repeated, solemnly and with a tremulous note of emotion in his voice.

Hilda saw the red color deepen about his neck and cords stand out there.

"I want you to get that," Ed continued. "I propose to be fair with you. I'm giving you warning."

"Oh," murmured Harper, "are you leaving us?"

Ed brushed this remark aside. "I'm giving you fair warning," he said again.

Hilda wondered if Ed had a debate in mind. Blink would have had the business over with by this time. Then her gaze wandered down over the curiously unimpressive person of the glove buyer, and the beginnings of a depression touched her spirit. Even now she could not think of any other course she might have taken. But this situation was grotesque. It was comic. There was no telling how it would result. And she could not see what on earth Ed was getting at—where he expected this sort of talk to lead.

Ed enlightened her. His eyes were turning swiftly here and there. He saw Harper's coat, thrown over a chair just beyond the end of the sofa and near one of the two windows. These windows, like nearly all the windows in Paris, extended from floor to ceiling, opening at the middle like a double door. He studied that nearest window

for a brief moment, then glanced again at the coat, then about the room. Harper's suit-case—a black affair, much worn and quite shapeless—lay open and empty on a chair by the washstand. Another coat and the waistcoat and trousers to match it, hung over the back of the chair. Two pairs of low shoes and one of gray spats lay in a small heap under the chair. A few shirts and some underwear had been balanced across the water pitcher. A nondescript little pile of personal belongings lay on the bed.

Harper, during this inventory-taking, swung around and sat up, smoking steadily, a thought puzzled. The fat little man had something in mind, apparently.

An expression of decision came into Ed's face. And his flush of excitement partly subsided. He moved swiftly over to the window, lifted the catch, and swung it open. Then he reached behind him, picked up Harper's coat, and threw it out, over the iron railing, into the dim shadows of the street below.

Harper sprang to his feet, surprised into an outbreak of profanity.

Ed turned, and, with the air of a man who is eminently practical, who is governed wholly by a fine sense of method, made for the suit-case.

Harper caught his arm and swung him around. The boy's anger had risen so suddenly that he was not coherent at first.

"Look here, you boob, whad 'o you think you— You get that coat—hear me! You big—"

"I warned you!" cried Ed, in a rising voice. It occurred to Hilda, who was still motionless and speechless in the doorway, that she had never before noticed how very high Ed's voice was pitched. "I gave you fair—"

The two were talking at once now. Harper was still gripping Ed's arm, and Ed was struggling unsuccessfully to jerk it away. Hilda felt like putting her hands over her ears. She was suddenly sorry for Ed. He *was* inadequate —quite inadequate.

Then Hilda felt herself crowded aside. Adele had brushed past her into the room. The two men, shouting at each other, and struggling—rather weakly, Hilda thought—had worked themselves around almost behind the bed, leaving the center of the room clear. Adele snatched up the empty suit-case and threw it out after the coat. Harper's extra shoes followed; then the shirts.

Hilda was still speechless; but she now moved on into the room and closed the door behind her. This thing was going to be a fight; and the baby still slept.

Adele was reaching for the odds and ends on the bed when Harper awoke to her part in the attack upon himself. He instantly quit his grip on the arm of the little man, darted around the foot of the bed and threw Adele against the wall with a force that left the girl white and breathless.

Hilda caught Adele's arm, and steadied her. Young Harper was exceedingly angry now; likely, indeed, to hurt some one. He was standing there, pouring out a torrent of ugly language at the girl—language that lashed Hilda's own spirit to a healthy anger the like of which she had not known in many years—when Ed Johnson, seeing the opportunity that Adele's diversion had opened to him, acted with sudden and quite unexpected vigor.

He came scrambling over the foot of the bed.

Harper turned, but not in time to dodge effectually. Ed sprang at him, from above, with a momentum that carried him to the floor with a crash.

Hilda distinctly felt the floor give under her feet. She saw the tall wardrobe rock, and heard the large water pitcher rattle loudly in the bowl.

For an instant after this there was utter silence. Young Harper lay on his back, breath gone, half stunned. Ed sat astride him, still gripping the hair he had caught at in his leap.

Hilda, feeling herself suddenly quite calm, and as if a mere disinterested spectator of this astonishing scene, noting that Harper's cigarette, still smoking, lay on the bed, casually burning its way through the coverlet, picked it up and dropped it in the wash bowl. Harper must have thrown it clear across the room in his first rush of excitement.

Harper was struggling again now—weakly at first, but with steadily increasing violence.

It occurred to Hilda that she had better give some attention to her champion. For Ed was plainly gripped in a high climax of sheer excitement. His face was nearly purple. His eyes were staring with an alarming wildness. He still managed to retain his insecure seat on the thrashing body, and at the moment, his fingers twisted in the ample hair of the young dancing man, was jerking the head about and pounding it on the floor with downright ferocity. Hilda suddenly realized, too, that the noise had set in greater than before. Harper was screaming with pain, uttering outrageous phrases that, had Hilda been listening in cold blood, would have shocked her beyond expression. But her blood was not cold . . . Ed was shouting things, too.

Harper relaxed for a moment, gathered what force he could, then made a determined effort to throw off his plump and masculine Nemesis. Adele, seeing the nimble legs of

her erstwhile dancing partner beating the air dangerously near to the head of the glove buyer, suddenly threw her slim self upon them and pinned them to the floor. Ed, meanwhile, renewed his furious manipulations of the head.

Hilda, genuinely alarmed, caught at Ed's shoulder. She found it necessary to shake him before he appeared so much as to know that she was there. Finally he glanced up.

"It isn't necessary to kill him, Ed," said Hilda.

The buyer of gloves considered this, without for an instant relaxing his hold on that mass of hair. Then he stared down into the red face beneath him.

"Are you ready to go after your clothes now, like a little man?" he asked, breathless but stern.

Harper returned the stare rather uncertainly. Then he shot a bewildered glance at the tall beautiful woman who, though so quiet, appeared to command the situation.

"Let me up," he muttered then.

Ed, finding this reply unsatisfactory, set his teeth and fell again to pounding the now much battered head against the floor.

Adele, seated firmly in an upright position on Harper's shins, looked on over Ed's shoulder with quiet satisfaction.

"All right," cried young Harper—"Ouch! Quit it! Cut it out, can't you! All right—I'll go! Lemme be, there!"

Ed's fingers slowly and reluctantly disentangled themselves from that tempting hair. Very slowly and heavily he got to his feet.

All now became conscious of a furious knocking at the corridor door.

Hilda opened it. The manager of the hotel stood there —a small, round-shouldered Frenchman of middle age— supported in the rear by the muscular Gustave whose *metier* was the making of beds.

The manager waved his arms, sputtering French phrases so rapidly that only Adele caught the drift of them.

It was she who replied, saying, *"Il est voleur! Il est voleur! Maintenant il sort, je crois!"*

And *sort* Will Harper did—followed by the still sputtering manager, the muscular maker of beds, and, as far as the head of the stairs, by Ed Johnson, a triumphant little wreck of a man.

Ed returned just as Adele observed that Harper had quite forgotten the little heap of personal possessions on the bed. She pounced upon them, gathered them into her arms, carried them to the window, and, one by one threw them down into the street—hair brushes, bottle of brilliantine, rumpled balls of underwear and hosiery, a pair of clogging shoes, tube of dentrifice, and tin make-up box.

Then she turned back into the room, brushing her disarranged hair back into place and chuckling softly.

"There's a crowd down there," she explained, "and a couple of *gens d'armes*. They won't let Will pick up his things. Gustave has got the suit-case." She paused, listened and sobered. "Baby's crying!" she exclaimed, and slipped into the other room.

Hilda, meanwhile, felt some concern regarding Ed. At the moment he was on his hands and knees, his head under the bed.

"You've lost something, Ed," she cried.

"Button off my vest," he explained. Shortly he found it, and got to his feet.

"I'll sew it on, Ed!" said Hilda, impulsively.

"Not at all necessary," he replied. "Thank you."

He had reverted to the unusually solemn spirit in which he had first entered the room. Hilda studied him, torn be-

"It isn't necessary to kill him, Ed," she said

tween a warm sense of Ed's sturdy fighting loyalty and a strong impulse to burst into hysterical laughter.

He was covered with dust. A considerable amount of it had got on his face, which was streaked and grimy. There was a small cut and a larger swelling under his left eye, from which a little blood had run to mix with the dirt. His hair, thin on top but rather thick over his ears, now stuck up nearly straight on both sides.

"Ed—you're hurt!" cried Hilda.

"Oh, no," said he, with dignity. "No, not at all." He spread out his grimy fingers and looked at them. "I only broke a finger nail. I think, Hilda, if you don't mind, I would like to wash my hands."

Hilda, rather than wait, herself took a pitcher down the hall for hot water. Ed rolled up his sleeves and got himself as clean as he could, scouring his face excepting in the neighborhood of the injured eye, where he rubbed in gingerly fashion.

"Oh, Ed," said Hilda, "you're going to have a black eye! You'd better get right back to the Continental and tie some raw meat on it."

"It's really nothing," said Ed. "Nothing at all! Perhaps you have a clothes brush, Hilda."

Very carefully he brushed himself, placing first one foot and then the other on a chair, in order to dust off each trousers leg in turn. He rubbed his shoes with his handkerchief. Then he put on coat and overcoat, which Hilda brought in from the other room.

He stood in the center of the floor to say good night, just where he had stood in beginning the little debate with young Harper that had turned so abruptly from words to action. Hilda thought of this. And so, perhaps, did Adele,

who now came to the door and looked in. The baby had stopped crying.

"It was my plan to do this thing quietly," said Ed. "I'm sorry he made so much trouble."

"That's all right, Ed," Hilda replied, loosing the smile that had been struggling to come. "You did the job."

Ed waved his hand. "Nothing at all. . . . Sorry, Hilda, but I've got to go to Strasburg in the morning. I'll only be here a day or so at a time for the next two weeks. But I'll send over my route and hotels in the morning, so you can wire if you need me."

"We shan't need you," said Hilda, promptly. "Good night, Ed. I hope you won't feel any the worse for this."

Adele stepped forward and took his hand—a thought shyly.

"Good night," said he. "Good night, all. If you have any trouble, telegraph me."

"We shan't have any trouble, Ed," said Hilda.

And Adele put in—"He won't come back."

"Between you and I," Ed observed, more cheerfully—"between you and I, he won't."

Then, very dignified, he went out and away.

When the door was closed, Hilda sank down on the edge of the bed and looked about the somewhat damaged room. Adele dropped on a chair.

Hilda felt the long-suppressed laughter rising. She pressed her handkerchief to her mouth—she had never exhibited any lack of self-control before Adele; she preferred not to now. But the impulse was strong. She found herself fighting back an actual giggle—such a giggle as she had not been guilty of for years and years, not since that girlhood that had ended so abruptly and unexpectedly when the work of her life began.

As it happened, Adele broke down first. She laughed so hard that her effort to control herself, at least until she could close the door on the baby, nearly strangled her. Then the two—the little dancing girl who had lived so queer a life, and the youngish but experienced business woman of settled habits and authoritative ways, looked at each other and laughed until the tears ran unrestrained down their cheeks.

"Anyway," Adele managed to say, after a time, "he's a good scout!"

XVI

IN WHICH ED JOHNSON TRIES TO PUT OVER A DIFFICULT PROPOSITION, AND FAILS. THE RETURN OF A PERSON OF IMPORTANCE; A PRESSURE OF HANDS; AND THE WHITE LIGHTS OUT BY THE PORTE MAILLOT

ED JOHNSON returned from Strasburg before the week was out, and promptly dropped in at the Hotel de l'Amerique. Hilda liked his coming in that offhand way, without preliminary notes or telephonings. It indicated his faith in her, his complete acceptance of her little adventure in life as she had represented it to him.

They dined together, she and Ed, then and once or twice during the following week. One afternoon he took a walk with her while she wheeled the baby out in the new English perambulator. They talked of the store, of persons, of Paris, of life as a problem. One evening Ed opened his heart regarding the injustice of an accounting system which charged to his department more than three thousand dollars a year that should have gone to "overhead." Ed felt deeply on this subject; and Hilda found it a rather pleasant revival of her working habits to go over the problem with him and straighten him out. For Ed was wrong about those charges.

She had many moods. Sometimes memories of Moran hovered intimately in her thoughts. At other times Doreyn's strong sad personality came magically close. Then

the baby would fill her life, as on the morning when Adele so excitedly called her in to see the first unmistakable smile.

It was plain now, even to herself, that she was drifting more and more rapidly in some new direction. Frequently, at night, thoughts came that frightened her. Hardly a day passed that she did not find herself struggling with the inner urgings to get back as quickly as possible to her own land, where the old environment would claim her and set her right. But even at these moments she knew that the days were passing and that she was drifting on and on.

Every day she looked through the *Herald* and at least one of the London papers for some news of Doreyn; but found none. She wondered if he was still in London. She wondered why he had come at all. . . . She fell to looking up the personal items from Carlsbad and the other watering places of the continent for news of him. . . . She was really afraid of him, or rather of the tremendous force he had been in her life. She could not put down the recurrent belief that he had come abroad to find her. There were ways enough in which he could have traced her. It would be like him. When he wrote that non-committal little note, saying that he wished to come to New York to talk with her, he had it in his mind to find her. He meant to have that talk. Otherwise he would not have written at all, after five years of silence. For Harris Doreyn never acted from vague motives. She recalled an old saying of his—"I try to make it a rule, Hilda, never to ask for a thing until I think I can get it." That had referred to his business struggles; but it was characteristic of the man.

But this line of thinking invariably brought her to an *impasse*. She told herself that it was nonsense, and sought to busy herself with external things. Still . . . it *was*

strange that he had not followed up that almost curt note with another—and that he had crossed the ocean only to remain silent.

The explanation that she usually fell back on was that he had been planning a journey abroad and had thought of looking her up in New York as he passed through.

The one interest that seemed to be strong enough to crowd out these thoughts appeared to be the daily news from the training camp of the redoubtable Blink Moran. Blink had not written; but the papers were watching him closely. Adele, every day, helped Hilda decipher the French despatches. After these intimate glimpses of the man at his work, Hilda always felt closer to him. It even occurred to her that she sometimes deliberately indulged herself in sentimental day-dreams of Blink as a defense against the encroachment on her spirit of the hopeless memories of Doreyn. She was fighting Doreyn through her fighting man. She smiled a little at this thought, rather defiantly. And added to herself—"Well, Blink is big enough!" And then she dreamed on, wilfully permitting her thoughts to hover about the borders of love.

The fight was to take place on the twenty-fourth of March. Ed Johnson, fortunately for Hilda, was sailing on that day. He returned to Paris from his last short trip on the twenty-second, and at once sought Hilda. She had wondered a little, before this, how Ed had happened to escape the fever of interest in the coming event that had stirred all western Europe. She never stepped into the American Express office now, or walked along the boulevards, without hearing Americans or Englishmen discussing the match, or laying bets. Yet Ed had not spoken of it.

But at last it had reached him.

"Tough luck, Hilda," he observed, as they seated them-

selves at the Lucas for a leisurely dinner—"here I am sailing on the very day of the Moran-Carpentier fight. Can you beat it! Been traveling so hard, away from the papers, I didn't know it was coming so quick, or I'd a-planned better. Thought it was next month. It ought to be you going and me staying. Ain't that just the way! Here you've got all the chance in the world to see a real big thing, and it's wasted on you."

"Not wasted, Ed. I'm interested."

"Well, but what's that? You aren't crazy about it. It doesn't mean anything to you. Now with me—I've seen Moran fight. And I met him once—over here, last year."

Hilda smiled faintly, and was silent.

"Tell you what, though, Hilda"—Ed looked very knowing—"I got a tip last night. From a fellow on the train—an English newspaper man, who's been down to Moran's training camp. He says if I can get any odds on Moran to grab 'em up. Moran's in wonderful shape. They aren't saying anything in the papers, but last week he knocked Al Banning cold, and with eight-ounce gloves. Think o' that! Banning's quit him now. Said they couldn't pay him enough to take any more o' that."

It was on the following evening, the twenty-third, that Hilda was to dine with Ed for the last time. She was dressing for the occasion when Adele handed her an envelope in an unfamiliar hand—a large boyish hand. The postmark was Orleans.

The note within was characteristic:

"Dear Hilda: I will be back the 24th about noon. Will be pretty busy, having to weigh in at 3 o'clock and other things. If I don't see you in p. m. will call for you at nine o'clock in evg.—Yrs. truly, Albert Moran."

She kept this note by her, and as soon as Hilda returned to her own room read it again. Then, when Ed's card came up, she folded the note and slipped it into her bodice. It was hidden there when she descended the stairs and joined her escort of the evening.

As they left the hotel and turned toward the Rue Tronchet, it occurred to Hilda that Ed was unusually quiet. She wondered a little. Also he was deferential, with something of that amusingly ceremonial manner he had exhibited just before his fight with Will Harper.

The first thing he said after the dinner was ordered and the English-speaking maitre d'hôtel had left them to their own devices, was—

"Hilda, I've been thinking you over, and do you know I believe—you won't mind my saying this?"

"Of course not, Ed. Let's have it!"

"—Well, I believe you've got the wrong notion of this vacation thing."

Hilda's heart quickened. There was something back of this.

"I don't know what you mean, Ed."

"Well, now, suppose we look at it this way." He planted his elbows on the table, frowned, and bristled up his mustache. Hilda knew the signs. Ed had a "proposition" to "put over"—one that he himself regarded as difficult. "Here you are, booked for a vacation, a real rest. You're in Paris—the meanest city on earth for a girl like you—a good-looking girl—to be alone in. Bound to be trouble for you, any way you turn. And God knows it ain't restful. It's—it's hectic. Hectic! . . . Now from the things you've told me—just what you've let drop now and then—it won't be any easier if you try to travel around Europe alone. Now will it?"

Hilda admitted this, with a movement of her hand.

"Well, now, here's what I've been thinking. You cut out this here Latin Quarter stuff and come back home. You don't want to come to the store—I can see all that—but—well, I know a place up in the Berkshires that is *the* ideal place for you. Oh, I know you can't just sit around hotels. But this way you won't have to. It's a year-round place. Great for exercise—riding, golf and things. Nice quiet people. Nobody can say anything about you. Mr. and Mrs. Hartman run up there a good deal in their car for week ends. And the Hemsteads. Mr. Hartman and Joe Hemstead both like the golf course there."

Hilda let him run on, while her own thoughts, behind a quiet mask, darted hither and thither. Something had happened. Ed was downright worried about her—and suddenly, since last night. And she let him go on because she dreaded facing the issue.

The dinner became a debate. She gave him, frankly enough, the reasons why she felt unwilling to return to the states. She gave him, as well, several opportunities to be explicit. He did not grasp these opportunities. Which concerned her the more. For Ed was not ordinarily secretive, excepting in a trade.

Finally, after the dessert and coffee, she herself leaned forward on the table and looked straight at his bulging eyes.

"You'd better tell me what it is, Ed. Something has happened."

Ed studied his coffee cup; stirred his spoon slowly round among the dregs.

"Are they still talking at Armandeville's—about me?"

Ed bristled his mustache, then slowly nodded.

Hilda considered this. Then, as with a sudden flash of insight, she broke out—

"Ed, that is not it. There's something more."

Still he was silent.

"You have heard from home, Ed."

He slowly raised his eyes. He nodded.

"And that's why you want the Hartmans and the Hemsteads to see me."

"Well, Hilda—"

"Careful, Ed. Not too loud."

"—you see, I know you're all right. And they'll know it, too, once they get a good look at you. Why, Hilda, you look even better to me. I may as well tell you—I used to think you were—well, just a little hard. Sometimes. But this experience, the baby, and all of it, has humanized you, somehow. You seem bigger. I was thinking just to-day that some real experience like this was more what you needed, all along, than a rest. It seems to be bringing something out that was hidden before."

"And so you want me to give up this wonderful experience and go back to what you call a 'rest'?"

"Well, but that is just the practical side of it, Hilda. It's what they all think, and what you may have to pay some day—all your life, perhaps—just because you let them go on misunderstanding you. . . . I've seen what you're doing here, you see. I know the whole thing, just what your life is. And I tell you, it's great. I'm for you. But how are you going to make them understand, thinking about Paris in the nasty way all of us do, and with a lot of knockers kicking up a fuss!"

Blink's note, hidden within her bodice, burned against Hilda's breast.

"Tell me just what has happened, Ed—just what they are saying. I have a right to know."

"Yes, you have, of course. Well, they're saying—it

seems to have got pretty much all around the store, and probably outside, in the trade—you know how it would be—"

Hilda inclined her head.

"—that you're staying with a fast crowd here in Paris, and that you've—"

"Say it, Ed."

"Well—that you've 'gone to pieces.'"

"Who is saying it, Ed?"

"Well—of course—"

"Is it Stanley Aitcheson?"

"Well, yes, I believe so. And May Isbell some, too, I'm afraid."

"Those two would be the ones, of course."

Ed spoke up. "Now you know, Hilda, you can't run these things down absolutely. I'm just giving you my own guesses after putting two and two together."

They fell silent. Hilda appeared to be musing, calmly.

Ed watched her. He saw the color creep into her cheeks, faintly, in two round spots over her cheek-bones. Excepting for these spots of color she looked rather white. Her skin was very fine in texture. Ed thought again, as he had thought on many occasions, that Hilda was a mighty good-looking woman. He thought, too, that it was too bad about these good-looking women in business. What were you to do with them! And what on earth were they to do with themselves! . . .

Then he realized that she was speaking—very calmly, very deliberately, looking right at him. Her eyes were open and honest. She frightened him a little.

"Since we've got this far, Ed, I think I had better give you one more bit of information—just to clear my slate."

She drew out Blink's note and gave it to him.

"Do you want me to read this, Hilda?"

She nodded—with compressed lips.

"Why, this—" Ed stopped short. Then: "This is—"

"That is the famous Blink Moran, Ed."

"And you know him."

She nodded. She saw his glance rest for a second time on the "Dear Hilda."

"I'm going to the fight with him, Ed."

"You—just you two—"

"Yes."

"But it's so conspicuous. People will think—"

"Yes, Ed, people will think. What of it? People are thinking anyway."

Ed slowly, very slowly, folded the paper and handed it back. He was ceremonious again. And he was bristling his mustache.

Finally he said, after clearing his throat—"Hilda, what on earth do you want *me* to think?"

"Ed," said she then, with a little flash of fire in her tone, "ask me any question that's in your mind."

He struggled for a moment with painful thoughts. Then—muttering, "By God, I will!"—he returned her steady gaze, and said—

"Hilda, is there anything—are you—"

"You mean, is there anything—well, serious, between me and Blink Moran?"

"I guess that's what I mean."

Deliberately, rather coldly, she replied—

"No."

It was on her tongue then to add, impulsively—"It is really all right, Ed! I loved a man once, and it was *not* Moran. I'm simply going to this fight because he has asked me and because it will be interesting." These and other

explanatory sentences clamored for utterance. But something coldly honest within her held them back. Her one short "no" had been the truth—the truth of to-day. It might not be true of to-morrow. She knew herself now for a human being. She could not forever go on suppressing those deep yearnings and stirrings that make life the tangle it is. . . . Besides, there had been an unintentional emphasis in the very manner with which she had led up to this disclosure. Ed, when all was said and done, was no fool. He knew now that the occasion bore a peculiar importance in her own feelings.

But even at that, the moment brought its compensations. She was conscious of a deep stirring sense of utter honesty. At least, and at last, she was truthful with Ed. After the furtiveness that had clouded her spirit, and the searching, twisting tortures of suspicion borne in to her from the ugly world about her, there was a rough joy in taking the straight blow and meeting it with the unqualified truth. It was a climax. It was an end to the terrors of fear and suspense. . . . She was a pariah! Well and good! The fact released her, gave her freedom to be herself.

They said little during the walk back to the hotel. Ed was sober. She knew he was perplexed. But she had rested her case.

At the door he took her hand.

"Good-by, Ed," she said, rather quickly. "I hope you have a good voyage."

"Thanks, Hilda."

"And give my regards to—" she stopped; a faint cold smile came to her face. He saw it by the dim light of the street lamp on the corner.

Then she finished—"to any one that cares!" pressed his hand, and entered the building

She waited all that next afternoon—the twenty-fourth—in her room. Adele offered to relieve her while she took her usual walk, but on one pretext or another she evaded a direct reply. More than once, as the hours wore away, she felt Adele's eyes on her—those "cow eyes," as she had once called them; now rather big, set in a more than usually composed face. Adele stayed in too.

Hilda once or twice spoke of slipping into a negligee and taking a nap. But every moment she was thinking that he would come, would tap at her door, would enter as a matter of friendly right; and so she kept herself fully dressed. It seemed, even to herself, rather absurd to be self-conscious about her attire—with Blink! During those hard painful nights of watching and working over the baby she had been clad anyhow—as it happened—without a thought. But self-conscious she certainly had become.

Neither she nor Adele mentioned his name during that long afternoon. Hilda had not told Adele of her plan to go to the fight. The nearest she came now to mentioning it was in the remark, the extremely casual remark—

"You don't expect to be out to-night, Adele?"

To which the girl, first glancing at her, then turning away, replied—

"Not that I'd thought of. No, I'll be home."

It was just before six o'clock when Hilda finally heard the familiar quick, light step in the hall.

She held her breath, awaiting the tap at the door.

There it was.

"Come in!" she called. The baby was awake, and quietly enjoying the flavor of two small fingers. Adele was in her own room.

He entered. Hilda, standing by the baby's basket, extended a friendly left hand which he took and held.

"She's a lot better," said he, peering into the basket.

"Improving every day, Blink."

He pressed her hand. It was a frankly affectionate little squeeze.

Hilda felt the color come rushing to her cheeks; and tried, silent, to fight it back.

She took advantage of Blink's absorption in the baby to study him. He was only a little thinner—there were the same broad shoulders, the same deep chest. His face was bronzed and a little drawn. There were lines in it. And, despite his interest in herself, and in the baby that they two had saved, he had an air of preoccupation. That was natural.

"Got to run along, Hilda," he said. "Be ready at nine."

She nodded. Then the door had softly closed, and he was gone. It seemed to her that he had called out a greeting to Adele; but she was not certain. Her thoughts were deep within herself.

Hilda had never in her life dressed with greater care than she employed on this occasion. Blink had never seen her at her best, or anything like it. Well . . . he would see her at her best to-night! He would not know that her gown had come from Callot's. He would not know that the opera wrap of old rose fringed and lined with snowy fur, had been picked up, and not at a bargain, for this very occasion. It would not occur to him that her rather luxuriant hair had been arranged with a simplicity that only some thought and care could produce. He would merely know that the woman who was to appear at the great gathering by his side—his friend and companion, before the ugly, if momentarily admiring world—was a woman of whom he could be proud. She was seeing to that. He would find her a thoroughbred—he would be proud.

She was ready at a quarter to nine. Then she counted seconds. Adele, pleading a headache, had closed her door and was lying down.

Finally he came—in immaculate evening dress, as on that other evening, long ago—oh, so long ago!—when he had escorted her to this same Luna Park, this extremely French Luna Park, out by the Porte Maillot. She wondered, as he paused in the doorway and gazed at her—yes, she had broken through his preoccupation now!—if he thought of the modest gray sparrow she had looked on that evening.

She could not tell what he was thinking. But she saw his eyes—soberer and deeper set than before—light up. And she could not resent the frankness with which he studied her from head to foot—he looked so pleased.

"All right, Hilda," he said. "Taxi's here."

She walked down the stairs by his side. They passed the round-shouldered little manager of the hotel, and she held her head high. He handed her into the taxi—got in beside her—the door slammed—they were off.

They did not speak. He was preoccupied again. That was all right; he ought to be preoccupied.

He reached over with a big gloved hand, and felt for one of her hands. She let him find it. He gripped it.

She winced. He did not realize the strength in that hand of his.

She stole more than one glance at him, there in the semi-darkness. He was leaning a little forward, gazing at the chauffeur's back. His mouth was firmly set. The new lines in his face were deep shadows. . . . His grip tightened on her hand.

Finally she said:

"Not too hard, Blink. I'm not Carpentier!"

"Oh!" he exclaimed; and released her hand. He did not turn his head, did not even smile. An uprush of almost mother-like sympathy softened her thoughts of self. She suddenly realized what a night this was to be—for him! Almost certainly it was the turning point in his career. He had told her before he left Paris, that the time would soon pass in his life when it would be possible to submit himself to the rigorous training that was necessary for this fight. She knew, as she watched him, as she felt his solid shoulder warm against her own, that all his courage, all his will-power, all his splendid native character, were to be put to the test this night. There was an extraordinary thrill in the thought.

She reached out now, found his hand, and nestled hers within it.

"It's all right, Blink," she breathed. "Only don't hurt me. You *are* strong, you know."

He glanced around at her now, with half a smile; and squeezed her hand, very gently.

She returned the pressure.

Through the cab window she saw a blaze of electric lights in circles and arches.

"Luna Park," said he.

XVII

IN WHICH THE TWO PERSONS OF IMPORTANCE FINALLY DO MEET IN A BUSINESS WAY; WITH IMPRESSIONS OF A LITTLE WORLD THAT IS, TO PUT IT MILDLY, RATHER BIZARRE

THE chauffeur, at a word from Moran, drove on past the long line of taxis and private cars before turning in to the curb. Then Moran and Hilda walked back through the groups of idlers and followers of the sport that crowded the area outside the plaster gates. It seemed to her that there were thousands of these men and boys, most of them roughly dressed. Newsboys were shouting. Program venders and speculators in tickets were thrusting their wares under her eyes. From the close line of automobiles at the curb streamed men in evening dress, each shouldering and elbowing a way for the richly gowned woman at his side.

Hilda waited, with an eager sort of dread, for the moment when her escort would be recognized for the celebrity of the evening. This moment came before they were halfway to the gate. There was a sudden hush in that part of the crowd immediately about them; then low excited voices. Old and young closed in around and behind them. There were a few friendly shouts; and then, slowly, the crowd parted before them.

Moran had taken her arm, and was rushing her rapidly along. He seemed quite unconscious of the respectful, at moments almost worshipful, attitude of the crowd. As far

as she could observe, he was thinking only of hurrying her to the comparative shelter of the gates.

A moment more and she found herself handed through the entrance to the main building, and standing apart from the crowd. Confronting her was an absurd little man—apparently very young—with a bad complexion and an enthusiastic smile that disclosed an extraordinary array of gold teeth. He, like Moran, was in evening dress. This, Moran's brusk introduction made plain, was Henry Huybers. Hilda gave him a second glance, as she took his eagerly proffered hand; and, with some small effort, concealed her amusement.

Already another little crowd was forming. She glanced about, and saw a number of Americans and, she thought, Englishmen. Yes, it *was* conspicuous! The color came again to her cheeks, as it had when Ed Johnson had given her that latest distressing word from home. But her head was high. Moran was speaking hurriedly to his manager. Henry Huybers was listening, and nodding, but Hilda could feel his eyes on her in crude admiration. His expression conveyed every distasteful thought that Blink had feared when he first spoke of her coming—thoughts that she had then brushed aside. Well, she would brush them aside again!

Suddenly Blink bent toward her, said, very low—"Wish me luck, Hilda!"—and turned away. Her eyes followed him as he moved swiftly through the crowd toward a door in the corner of the great hall and finally disappeared. Then she realized that little Mr. Huybers was speaking, and again let her eyes rest on him. That touch of high color was still on her cheeks; and she was smiling faintly. So this queer little man was the well-known "manager" whose name had appeared so frequently in the papers of

late—the man who, Blink had said, "would bet his grandmother's last pair of shoes on a fight." Yes, this rather unpleasantly boyish man was the somewhat celebrated Henry Huybers. "Just a born gambler," Blink had added to his characterization—"but he's a hustler."

He led the way now down a long aisle to a seat near one corner of the ring. And Hilda reflected deeply as she followed. When she and Blink were together it was impossible to think of his queer business as she was now compelled to think of it. Henry Huybers represented the other, the almost grotesquely disagreeable, side of that business. Evidently he was a sharp, eager, unscrupulous little man. She even nursed the whimsical doubt, watching his narrow shoulders hitching nervously from side to side as he walked before her, that his accounts would probably bear inspection. He was, of course, a parasite, living on Blink's work. And she was suddenly quite certain that he was cheating his principal at every turn. By the time he had reached the ringside seats and had turned to face her, she had arrived at a definite resentment against him. And she was depressed. The color had left her cheeks. Her smile was gone.

Huybers, visibly struggling against a sudden new embarrassment, said:

"Miss Wilson, let me make you acquainted with Mrs. Huybers."

Seated before them was a large woman, unnaturally blonde. She wore a number of diamond rings, diamond earrings, and a diamond and ruby pendant on her fat neck. Her evening gown was cut quite low, in the extreme Parisian manner. The skin of her face and neck was enameled smooth. Her hair was piled into a structure which had cost some *coiffeur* all of two hours of conscientious

labor. She appeared older than the nervously smiling Henry, as well as larger.

She met Hilda's coldly courteous greeting with a stare. She was hostile. And with scrutiny of the tall, well-poised, distinctly beautiful woman, her hostility deepened to indignation.

"How do you do, Miss Wilson," she said. The words came crisply out of an immobile face. "I believe you are to sit here." And she removed her wrap from the chair next her own.

Hilda felt that she was judged. It was as Blink had foreseen. Though she knew that could Blink's mind have compassed the extent and depth of Mrs. Huybers' scorn he would never have permitted Hilda to set foot within the hall. For Blink could not conceivably understand the bitterness that the safely married woman of uncertain past is capable of feeling toward a more beautiful woman whose legal position among men is in doubt.

Mrs. Huybers, however, knew that her own Parisian gown, her not inexpensive *coiffeur,* her very jewels, were results of Moran's prowess. Therefore she must accept the woman. And still crisply, in a voice that struggled to hide its inherent hardness, she spoke of the crowd, Moran's condition and Carpentier's, and of the probable gross receipts.

Hilda answered in kind, while her eyes roved over the great hall. She thought of her only other appearance here —also with Moran—and, with little, twisting, painful thoughts, of the distance she had gone with him since.

A band was playing. The sound, however, was all but lost in the immense space beneath that roof of steel and glass and flags and gay-colored lights. The thousands upon thousands of seats were nearly all filled now; and streams of people were pouring down the aisles. She wondered

where they could all find places. Faintly, from a far corner of the gallery, came the sounds of an amusing contest; boys and men were braying, neighing and cackling. One youth, with a peculiar gift for crowing like a very small rooster, was finally hailed as victor. Again and again, as the others gave up, his shrill falsetto vied with the muffled blare of the distant band, until even the dignified folk of the main floor burst into laughter and applause.

There must have been two thousand women in the hall. It was gay with their white and blue and pink and yellow. Scattered everywhere were the inevitable army officers—in red and gray-blue and deep blue—with much gleaming and glinting of gilt.

Men were climbing into the ring now. An extremely fat announcer in evening dress got himself in between the ropes. It occurred to Hilda that the inevitable "preliminaries" would be going on. Sure enough, two slim youths appeared in opposite corners, rinsed their mouths with water from bottles, rubbed their shoes briskly in the powdered resin that lay thick on the canvas-covered floor, and held out their bandaged hands while their seconds adjusted the gloves.

The fat announcer shouted their names and weights in a voice that reverberated through the vast spaces of the hall. The seconds slipped rapidly out of the ring. The referee, in sleeveless black jersey, called the slim youths to the center and gave them his final instructions. The gong clanged. And the great audience looked up with listless interest as the boxers, suddenly alert, sprang at each other in a wild rushing exchange of blows.

It was a rough spectacle; but Hilda had come prepared to witness a rough spectacle. She recalled Blink's quiet utterance regarding Carpentier—"I'm going to put him to

She met Hilda's coldly courteous greeting with a stare

sleep if I can." And again she felt a dread that was not without an element of fascination. She watched the young fighters before her with keen eyes, studying the methods of each in setting about his curious task. The taller boy, with longer arms, was evidently bent on holding his more compact, more nervously active opponent at arm's length. The shorter youth was as strongly determined to rush in close and land short, hard body blows.

Hilda followed this struggle for the tactical advantage with kindling interest. Rough as it was, it was real—even, as she had felt after that earlier introduction to the most primitive of sports, wholesome. And it was certainly more agreeable than the atmosphere in which it appeared to thrive. Henry Huybers, his bleached enameled wife, the seconds and hangers-on, the unpleasant crowd outside the gates, the gamblers who had a finger in the preliminary arrangements—all these were distressing. Blink himself was not like these, yet they formed the intimate background of his life.

The first round was still in progress. The shorter boy was still rushing violently. There was a stir of interest now in the crowd. The short boy rushed again. Hilda heard the thud of the blow he landed on the slim body before him—saw the taller youth wince and stagger back, then, hurt and angered, plunge forward to close quarters. For a brief moment the two boys stood close, bending over, heads together, each working his forearms like lightning. An electric thrill ran through the crowd. The gallery suddenly burst into an enthusiastic roar.

Hilda could not follow the blows. But she saw the taller youth suddenly droop, close his eyes and slip senseless to the floor; while the other stood over him, flushed and triumphant, eager to strike again, until the referee, counting

with long slow sweeps of his right hand, brushed the victor away with his left.

Hilda felt rather weak. And the noise was deafening. But she took it all in—the exulting wave of the victor's arms and the wild grin on his somewhat battered face as he vaulted the ropes; the rush of downcast seconds and backers to carry the vanquished boy to his corner and revive him with rough massage and cold sponges. Under this treatment he slowly came to his senses. Then, a sick-appearing youth, he was helped down through the ropes and down the long aisle, a naked glistening arm about his manager's neck.

Hilda was turning cold. What if she should have to sit here and see something like this befall Moran! It would be dreadful. She was not sure that she could sit still. It was incredible that such a thing could happen to the strong solid man who, right now, so dominated her thoughts. And yet . . . Carpentier was a great fighter, the champion of France and England, full of confidence, a master of every trick and device known to ring strategy.

"Excuse me," said an unpleasant voice, close to her ear.

Hilda started, and turned.

Mrs. Huybers had twisted her plump person about in the narrow chair, and was folding her wrap over the back. Hilda moved aside and gave her room.

"Rather exciting," observed Hilda, when Mrs. Huybers had disposed of this little matter to her satisfaction and turned again toward the ring.

The fat woman shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, yes," she replied, languidly. "But what'd he expect. He oughta known he couldn't fight with that boy. He oughta've boxed."

Hilda kept silent after this. She gathered that to "box,"

in this sense, meant to keep one's opponent at a distance, blocking him off with the hands and arms rather than exchanging blows at close quarters, rather than—she had picked up the phrase in an English paper—trying to "beat him to the punch." And she added this bit of technical information to her meager store.

Another match followed almost immediately. Mrs. Huybers said it was the "main preliminary." Two middleweights, men of some skill, fought their way through ten rounds of rapid action, amid considerable excitement.

Hilda did not share in the excitement. She deliberately studied the strategy and tactics of the battle. Neither man lost his head for a moment. Each appeared able to weather an exhausting storm of blows and then spring to take advantage of a momentary opening. Their endurance was, indeed, quite as astonishing as their alertness and agility.

The seats occupied by Hilda and Mrs. Huybers were in the second row from the actual ringside, close to one of the corners of the ring, where crouched the manager and handlers of one of the fighters—whispering excitedly together like a board of strategy and occasionally uttering low-voiced instructions to their man in the ring. Hilda wished that she had more understanding of colloquied French; it would have been interesting to catch what they were saying.

She could not see that either of these contestants held any great advantage over the other. At the finish both were strong. When the final bell rang they actually embraced, wreathed in sudden smiles, and each planted a kiss on the cheek of his opponent. Then the fat announcer entered the ring, collected slips of paper from the jury that was scattered about the four sides, in the front row of chairs, and indicated that the shorter and darker of the two, in the far corner, was the *"vainqueur."*

Hilda was a thought puzzled by the decision. But doubtless, during the numerous swift exchanges, the dark man had actually struck the greater number of blows, thereby accumulating the more "points." Evidently, though, her doubts were shared by others. The gallery roared its disapproval of the decision. Even on the main floor, the applause was clouded by hisses and, from small groups here and there, unmistakably British booings.

But this little protest very soon died out, and the great audience began settling itself for the main event. The officials left the ring and stood about in groups, talking with one another and with the newspaper men. White-clad attendants mopped the corners of the ring, and brought fresh pails of ice and bottles and sponges and towels. New persons appeared at the ringside—men with poker faces and impenetrable smiles. The famous English referee—the one referee on whom the rival camps had been able to settle—walked rather magnificently down the aisle and seated himself on a corner of the press table. He wore gray flannels and, like his predecessor, a sleeveless jersey; and had drawn a bath towel around his shoulders. Men crowded about him, asking eager questions which he answered curtly or, now and again, met with cool silence. . . . What a little world it was! A world all complete within itself; with its princes and peasants, its failures and successes; with, almost, its language!

Men came to Mrs. Huybers' side. Each of them that stout person presented to Hilda with scrupulous observance of their common interest. To most of these Hilda found she could not talk at all. They were types of the sporting world, distinctly. Not one of them was like Moran. After a little her thoughts wandered; and while she reflected on the strangeness of her own relation to this queer

world, she looked around at the audience, picking out a familiar face here and there; faces of business men she had met in her various trips to Paris, or ship acquaintances, and others. None of them appeared to see her. She was glad of this, on the whole; though she shrank from nothing this night. . . . And more and more, as the moments passed, as the voice of Mrs. Huybers droned like sounding metal in her ears, as self-important attendants hustled about the ringside, as the great audience stirred and buzzed expectantly, Hilda felt that she was living in a dream. It was utterly unreal. Her life of the last few weeks appeared as a queer blur of events which she might have imagined, or read about, or witnessed from a distance. She suddenly found herself thinking how amusing it would be to wake up, dress, eat her light breakfast, and take the subway down-town to the store and the routine work of the day. . . . But a faint throbbing at the back of her head as suddenly reminded her that the store was a very long way off indeed, that she could not return to it now; not now. And then—suddenly, sharply real—came the stinging memory of that last talk with Ed Johnson . . . what he had said . . . she was in with a "fast crowd"; she had "gone to pieces." . . . How absurd it was! But no, *was* it absurd?

There was a sharper stir at the rear of the hall, a louder buzzing, a shout, a thrill, a roar. And then, like a wave, the immense crowd swept to its feet.

Hilda put her hands over her ears. Then, caught by the electric excitement of the yelling audience, she rose and looked back along the aisle.

She could see them coming rapidly toward her—the tall blond Carpentier, in a bath robe, collar turned up about his shapely head, an easy smile on his youthful face. At

his side was a man in evening dress, doubtless his manager. Three men in jerseys and sweaters crowded close at his heels. Other men followed, with still more pails and towels. And behind these, still others.

The great man gave no heed to the friendly hands that reached out to him from every side. He brushed past the self-important ones, wearing that same impersonal smile, stepped around a group of reporters, ran lightly up the steps, ducked between the ropes, crossed the ring, and seated himself on the stool that an eager attendant placed for him in the corner. A moment more, and he was all but hidden by the privileged few that followed him up the steps and crowded about him. And the roar of five thousand voices, the clapping of ten thousand hands, the stamping of thousands of feet, drove in at Hilda's ear drums until, thrilled but a thought weak, she sank to her chair and looked up at the ring with sudden and momentarily complete misgivings.

There, on the three-legged stool, his lithe hard body enveloped in the bath robe, his hands, heavily bandaged about the knuckles and down almost to the finger tips, extended comfortably along the ropes against which he was resting, all relaxed, smiling up at his eager-faced manager, radiating confidence and good-natured self-control, sat the idol of France, the conqueror of England's greatest, the youth on whom a government had conferred special distinctions, the hero of the entire boxing and athletic world in a country where boxing is almost an honored profession and not an outlaw pursuit of the underworld.

There sat the great Carpentier. Within the next two hours either this great champion or her own quiet kindly Moran would leave that eighteen-foot ring a beaten man.

They were going to fight, those two. The sense of unre-

ality was on her again. She had to tell herself that this thing was so—that her Blink, Blink of that simple comradeship in her cramped quarters at the Hotel de l'Amerique, of those long quiet walks along the Seine, was actually about to fight this confident man. Her memory took to painting sudden vivid pictures. She saw him holding the baby; carefully wrapping the thin little body in a towel and dipping it in the tin bathtub. She saw him sitting with Adele's arm about his neck; and resented this.

She wondered why he did not appear. It was high time. The champion was waiting.

Then she heard applause. Again a wave of interest ran through the audience; but this had nothing of the intensity that had been stirred by Carpentier's appearance. She turned. There he was, coming along the aisle; also with his little group of seconds and handlers, and with Henry Huybers at his elbow. Like Carpentier, Moran wore a bath robe.

He passed without a glance of recognition.

Hilda wished that the audience would rise and cheer. But they did not. Carpentier was plainly the favorite. Moran therefore would have to exert himself without the support of the crowd. And, she reflected soberly, this would make a difference—a great difference, possibly.

Moran crossed the ring and gripped the champion's hand. For a moment they chatted pleasantly; then he returned and seated himself in the near corner. She could have spoken to him with only a slight raising of the voice; but she sat very still.

Henry Huybers took off his coat and gave it to Mrs. Huybers. Then he mounted the ring, crossed over, and examined the bandages on Carpentier's hands—rather ostentatiously, Hilda thought.

There was a long delay, and much discussion in the ring. Then, while each of the contestants talked quietly with his backers, the fat announcer called the inevitable series of fighters into the ring and made them known to the audience. Challenges were announced. Several of the awkward young men who blushed and fumbled with their hats as they bowed to the great assemblage had hopes of meeting the winner of this bout at some future time. So much Hilda gathered from the comments of the sporting gentlemen who were still grouped before Mrs. Huybers.

One of them, a pleasant-faced young fellow with pale eyes, whom Hilda had seen many times on Atlantic liners —a card player, she had once been told—was asking questions.

She heard him say:

"Is Blink going to work for the body?"

Hilda suppressed an impulse to shudder at this, and forced herself to listen calmly. She desired all the facts. For this affair, brutal though it might be, was in a sense her affair now.

"Yes, I believe so," Mrs. Huybers replied, casually.

"That'll mean some hard going," mused the young man. "For they'll both be doing it."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Huybers, "that's Carpentier's game, of course. But Henry won't let him mix it much right at the start. Carpentier'll tire quicker, you know. Blink's quite a little stronger." She was glib enough. She certainly had a strong proprietary interest in Moran. "We'll let Carpentier rush at first, you know, and begin mixing about the eighth or tenth round."

"That is," observed the card player, thoughtfully, "if nothing happens to upset the dope."

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Huybers, "Henry'll use his judgment, of course."

The gong was clanging violently. The sporting gentlemen scattered to their seats. The referee hung his bath towel on a corner post and advanced into the ring, as the seconds, managers and visiting fighters hurried out. Carpentier slipped off his bath robe and handed it down through the ropes. Then he rose, kicked the stool aside, grasped the ropes, and went through a few preliminary exercises to flex his muscles.

Again that electric stir was felt in the farthest corner of the hall. Men and women sat erect. The band stopped abruptly. There was a hush that was more moving than any noise could have been.

Moran now let his bath robe slip into the eager hands of Henry Huybers; and stood erect.

For a moment Hilda's eyes dropped. She knew that he stood there in all the beauty of his perfectly trained body, as she had seen him in the pictures; and, for the moment, she simply could not look at him. That curiously interesting set of statistics was running through her mind—the precise measurements in inches and fractions of inches of neck, chest, biceps, forearm, waist, thigh, calf.

When she raised her eyes, the two men were standing in the center of the ring, listening to the final words of the referee.

Blink was slimmer than she would have thought possible, slimmer even than he had appeared in the pictures. He was distinctly lighter than his opponent, and shorter. But his shoulders were broader, and his chest something deeper. It was his slender waist and thinnish legs that made him appear so much lighter than Carpentier. At the moment

he turned away and she caught her first full view of his back. Here, she instantly decided, lay much of his strength. It was a beautifully muscled back, big and powerful about the shoulders and curving in sharply toward the waist line.

The men separated and returned to their corners for a last scrape of rubber-soled shoes on the powdered resin. The referee raised his hand. The gong clanged.

The men whirled around, faced each other, touched right hands in the perfunctory greeting of ring sportsmanship, and squared away.

XVIII

TWENTY ROUNDS—TO A DECISION

HILDA, still deliberately controlling the emotions that were stirring at the back of her thoughts, studied the two fighters.

Carpentier, at the sound of the bell, had dropped into a crouch. His head was thrust forward, chin down against his chest, eyes peering out from beneath heavy blond eyelids. His feet were well apart, the left one advanced. His arms moved before his head in quick nervous shiftings and feintings. They were never still, those arms. She had heard one of the sporting persons observe that "Carpenteer" was "a great two-handed fighter." From his position, facing Moran almost directly, she now caught the meaning of the remark—simply that the man could strike effectively with either hand. In this connection she recalled that Blink had spoken, before he left for the training camp, of the "couple of youngsters" Henry had employed for him, "to practise my left on." Evidently Blink had to rely more on his right hand than on his left. This conclusion was borne out by his fighting pose. He had turned nearly half around, presenting little more than an extended left arm and shoulder to the champion, with his right hand held a little back, ready for a swing.

The two men eyed each other narrowly as they circled

about, each studying the other's pose, eyes, hands and shoulders, watching intently for the lightning-quick movement of eye or twitch of shoulder muscle that would signal the intention to strike.

Suddenly Carpentier danced in close, his shoulders swinging in a series of rapid feints. Moran receded. In the deep hush that had settled over the great audience Hilda was conscious of the sound of their resined feet shuffling on the canvas.

They circled again. Again Carpentier danced toward his opponent. Again his shoulders moved in that curiously deceptive way. Then he rushed. Moran swung forward to meet him. Hilda heard the thud of sharp contact, and saw the Frenchman drive his right hand against Moran's body with all the strength of his powerful back behind the blow.

The audience broke into a sudden sharp yell. But Moran was striking back, hard and clean. Carpentier stepped away. As he moved, Moran's right hand swung in over Carpentier's shoulder in a short, hard, astonishingly swift blow. It did not appear to land squarely, but it threw the Frenchman momentarily off his balance.

Instantly Moran was after him, tearing in with hard body blows, and a swing to the head that missed by a scant inch. The Frenchman ducked, slipped to one side, and when Moran could overcome the impetus of his own rush, was clear across the ring, with his guard up.

Hilda's breath was quite gone. She sank back in her chair, struggling against the sense of something near dismay that had rushed upon her. She had not realized that they would hit so hard. None of the other boxers that she had seen in her very limited experience at the ringside had struck with such speed or such solid strength. It was

wicked—vicious. The human frame could not be expected to withstand those savage onslaughts. Yet, this contest had only begun. For a full hour and twenty minutes these two would be driving at each other in that primitive, ferocious way.

She had wished, on so many occasions during the last few weeks, that she might see the real Moran—the Moran that was known so intimately to tens of thousands of followers of this queer business of boxing. Well, she was seeing him now. And she was finding that she did not know him at all. It was quite bewildering. And it was disturbing. The ugly dashing power of the man, his force and speed, his evident determination to hurt this other man, depressed her at the very moment that it caught her up in a whirl of sheer fascination. She did not want to see it. She wished herself anywhere but here. But she could not so much as look away. Her wide eyes followed every movement of this strange ferocious being who had lately been so close to her, whom she had all but admitted into her life.

The two men were breathing harder now. She could hear them. Their smooth-skinned bodies were shining with sweat.

Again Carpentier rushed. Again Moran met him squarely and exchanged blows with him; then slipped forward into a clinch. The alert referee stepped between them as he pulled them apart.

For a space they sparred and feinted, each watching keenly for an opening. Then the Frenchman danced closer. His shoulders moved in that curiously deceptive way. He shot in a number of light blows, some of which Moran certainly blocked with his arms. But when Moran thrust his left forward, and suddenly followed it with a hooking stab of his right, Carpentier danced away.

Suddenly, however, in the very act of retreating, he leaped forward, and left and right landed clean on the body of the American. Hilda saw Moran wince, and knew that the blows had hurt. For an instant the two seemed to be exchanging body blows, though their movements were so rapid that she could not be sure that either was really penetrating the other's guard. Certainly Moran did not clinch this time. In a moment she saw the reason. She knew that one of the rules agreed on was that the "clean break" should be enforced. Adele had explained to her the meaning of the phrase: that once the men should come so close that each was holding the other with one arm, they must break apart without striking. This was why the referee had stepped between them when he separated them. Now Moran, his arms still working away at the body before him, appeared to be retreating a little rather than clinch.

Then, all at once, Hilda saw his back stiffen and swing forward; his right foot moved up, and his right arm flashed up over Carpentier's left. The brown glove landed full on the side of the Frenchman's head, just below the ear, with a solid thud.

Carpentier did not fall; but he staggered sidewise clear to the ropes, and leaned there for an instant, bent over, his gloves and forearms closely covering his face and the vulnerable spot at the middle of the body.

A roar swept up from the audience that shook the great building. Behind her, Hilda could hear the scraping of chairs as thousands sprang to their feet.

For the second time within the round Moran leaped forward to strike again. He chopped sharply down at the only exposed spot, the back of the neck. But Carpentier, still unsteady on his feet, adroitly slipped under Moran's raised arm, and came to his familiar crouch ten feet away.

Then the bell rang. Moran's arms fell to his sides. And the two quietly passed each other, walking to their respective corners.

Instantly there was a whirl of activity about the ring. The stools were thrust in between the ropes. The inevitable pails and bottles appeared beside them. The men with towels appeared, fanning each contestant with full sweeps of muscular arms. One of Moran's handlers knelt before him, rested one of the bare legs on each of his own thighs, and set to work with strong nimble fingers manipulating the thigh muscles. Another masseur reached in from behind the post and worked on the chest and abdominal muscles. While, commanding all, Henry Huybers leaned over the ropes and poured a stream of low-voiced counsel into Moran's ears as he raised the water bottle to his lips.

Hilda recalled now that throughout the round Huybers had been crouching on the steps, calling out cabalistic instructions, his hair rumpled, face flushed, the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled above the elbows, the pleated bosom wet with perspiration, and his low-cut white waistcoat unbuttoned and swinging open, with his heavy watch-chain dangling from it. She resolved to listen more closely during the rounds to follow.

She glanced about the house. From every side came a buzz of excited comment. Apparently the great champion was not to have so easy a time of it—he had encountered a man who would make him work every foot of the way. Here and there, volatile Frenchmen were going over the events of the first round with illustrative gestures.

Then Hilda turned toward the woman at her side. At that instant she resolved to conceal her own wildly fluttering emotions. She would let this woman, whose companion

for the evening she must willy-nilly be, see precisely nothing of her real self.

Accordingly she observed—

"It looks rather good for us."

But the fat woman, to Hilda's surprise, was distinctly nervous.

"I'm not so sure," said she. "The way they give decisions over here, it don't matter who hits hardest or who's strongest at the end. They're all for points." Her voice rose a little. "Why, would you believe it, they'll give that round to Carpentier."

"I don't see that," said Hilda.

"Don't you see—it's all those foolish little pats of his. Every blow's a point, no matter how light it is. Oh, they make me sick! Blink's got to knock him cold to get anything."

There was a warning call from the timekeeper. Seconds and masseurs scrambled out of the ring, handing down pails and bottles as they went. The referee hung his towel on the post and stepped forward. The gong clanged; the second round had begun.

With the sound of the gong the two fighters rushed. They met in mid-ring with the solid thud of hard gloves on harder bodies. And standing there they fought; while the crowd, stirred by the unexpected speed and spirit of the contest, loosed a roar.

Henry Huybers, kneeling on the steps, was talking continuously. Hilda could hear him now, through all the uproar—

"Right—Blink. Get the right over! Crowd him—crowd him, boy! . . . Underneath—quick, he's crouching—Underneath! Harder! Right again! Quick now—keep going—at him, boy—Get him—*Get him!* . . .

Now the right!—Right, I tell you! . . . That's it—that's it! Now, under. Go under! That's it—you've got him. Now the—O-oh, one-two! Quick now—the one-two!"

That low but penetrating "O-oh!" from Huybers preceded by no more than a fraction of a second a savage yell from the entire great audience. For Moran, working with a cool speed and vigor that knew no opposition, was deliberately taking the champion's blows in order to land a series of short, hard right swings to the head; then, as Carpentier ducked lower, he brought an ugly left uppercut to the chin, and followed it by a sudden cutting loose of both hands in a rain of blows to the face and head.

"Careful, careful—you're taking big chances!" It was the shrill voice of Mrs. Huybers at Hilda's side.

Clearly, Moran and his manager had determined on a plan of campaign designed to catch the champion unawares. There was no evidence here of a decision to act on the defensive until Carpentier should begin to tire. On the contrary, Moran was mercilessly at him.

And the attack, for the moment at least, was effective. Carpentier was staggering. Moran uppercut again, with his left; and the Frenchman, in a desperate effort to dodge away from the right swing that was sure to follow, slipped and fell to his hands and knees.

Instantly the alert referee pushed Moran away and began that slow count.

Carpentier partly raised himself, glanced toward his own corner, as if for instructions, then settled back on one knee to take full advantage of the count.

Moran waited, cool, determined. His eyes were fixed intently on the kneeling figure. His jaws were set, and the heavy bunches of muscle stood out on either side. He was

shining with sweat; and his skin was red here and there where hard blows had left their mark. Over his right cheek-bone was a discolored swelling. And as he stood there, all alert, arms a little forward, fists clenched, ready to strike with all the strength that was in his wonderful body, he did not seem a human thing. He was a primitive force —savage in every fiber, calculatingly savage—dominated by the fierce intent to do harm and only harm. He was the fighting male, the destructive male.

"And this," thought Hilda, "is a business!" She felt weak, yet more and more caught up in the grip of the excitement that was shaking the great hall. She told herself that she would be ill after it was over. Then she forgot even this. She felt herself impelled to urge Moran on. He must win—her Blink must win. Yes, it was primitive. She was becoming primitive enough herself now. That man up there, that man whose life lay so strangely close to hers, was a wild splendid thing. He was a fighter. That was all right. Life is a fight. Business is a fight. She was a fighter herself—every minute, all the time. She had put men out in the fierce conflicts of business competition—she had tricked and outwitted them, in ways that hurt them and that hurt their wives and children. Was that any better than this? She wondered, in a swift wild way, while the bare arm of the referee swung slowly up and down like a semaphore, beating off the seconds—wondered if this frank fighting were not the better after all. Because it was franker. Then she wondered at herself—studying those nearly naked, sweating, battered human bodies up there in the ring—wondered at herself for thinking these wild thoughts. Was she simply bad, that these splendidly primitive fighting men should so outrageously excite her! . . . She was sitting straight up on the forward edge of

her chair, her hands tightly clasped in her lap, her eyes wide and very bright, her cheeks flaming. And more than one man was gazing straight across the ring, heedless of the fighters—gazing at her. But this she did not know.

"Seven!" called the referee, in crisp English. Then "Eight!" Then, "Nine!"

Carpentier was up, and crouching.

Instantly Moran rushed, tearing past the referee, actually whirling that dignitary aside in the speed of his onslaught.

There was a swift exchange of blows.

Suddenly Carpentier's right shot forward, from a crouch, straight against the stomach of the American. Hilda both saw and heard the blow. Too, she saw the agonized expression on Blink's face as he staggered back, just before he doubled over, tried weakly to cover, caught gropingly at the middle rope, then fell to the canvas.

Again the bare arm of the referee waved through the air.

At "Three," Moran was struggling to his knees. At "Four" he was rising. At "Five," the gong clanged, and the second round was over.

The fighters sank down on the waiting stools and leaned against the ropes. The seconds, masseurs and managers were at them on the instant, frantic to make the most of every one of the scant sixty seconds allotted them for their work.

Hilda found herself still sitting very erect, on the forward edge of her chair. And she knew that she was red as fire. Still, so were others. She leaned back, wondering how long she could stand the tension. Her heart was going like mad already. And but two rounds done. She must sit through eighteen rounds more—unless there should be a knockout.

She listened to the confusion of talk about her, picking

out, here and there, a British or American phrase—"Something doing, soon, my boy! They can't keep *that* up. Something'll drop, I tell you." . . . "Did you see that right?" "How about even money it don't go five rounds more?" . . .

Then she caught the strident voice of Mrs. Huybers—"Ain't Henry got *any* sense at all! Don't he *know* you can't rush Carpenteer like that? And only the second round! He'll be spilling the beans, that's what he'll be doing—spilling the beans!"

Again the gong. Again the pell-mell scramble of seconds and handlers. Again the two fighting men crouching, face to face, at the center of the ring, while the referee hovered at one side.

But this time there was no rush, no swift hard impact. Each had felt the metal of the other. Each had been as good as saved by the bell. They crouched—eyed each other—circled, but the blows they exchanged in moments of sparring carried no such sting as the blows of the preceding rounds.

It was astounding to Hilda that Moran should exhibit, to her untrained eye, so little evidence that the blow that brought him down had left any results behind it. He looked the same, excepting the fact that the bruise over his cheek-bone was now more prominent. He appeared cool. If anything he was breathing more easily than during the two earlier rounds; doubtless his "second wind" had come to him. But he was acting with greater caution. She wondered if this was not a bit of strategy, designed to give Carpentier the impression that his blow had seriously weakened Moran. That, she reflected, would not be such a bad plan. It might well lead the champion to drop some of his own caution and open himself to sudden attack.

But Carpentier had changed his tactics too. He seemed content, for the time, to feint, and dance, and "box," shooting in light blows from unexpected angles. Even Hilda could see that he was extremely skilful at this work. At boxing and jabbing he could land two blows to the American's one. This, he was now proceeding to do. And the accumulation of points was rapid and certain. Only once in the third round did he show an inclination to fight. He thrust a straight left, rather lightly to Moran's chin; then suddenly swung his right after it, and followed this blow by hooking his left to the body. But the thud that followed was not from Carpentier's fist. Nor was the sudden rocking of the head, wincing and falling back on the part of the champion caused by any attack of his own. Hilda could not follow the blows. But she saw the result. And, too, she heard the yell of the crowd! and heard the sudden scream of furious glee from the fat woman at her side.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Mrs. Huybers—it must be admitted, quite inelegantly—"Take that, will you, you big frog?"

"What was it?" Hilda asked. "What happened?"

"Blink uppercut him with his right. Some counter, if you ask me! A pippin!"

Hilda moved a little away from her. But the chairs were narrow. And Mrs. Huybers was fat.

Moran did not follow up his opening—merely studied his man, content, apparently, to check him, and make him continue leading. So passed the third round; and the fourth. Each man had "felt out" the other and found him strong. Carpentier, convinced, in spite of his one lucky blow at the close of the second round, that it was safer to box Moran than to fight him, bent his energies to the accumulation of those points that would certainly bring

him the decision, barring an actual knockout by his opponent.

Moran, for his part, seemed content to let a few rounds drift to the credit of the champion.

After the fourth round, however, Moran changed his method. Hilda had been startled, in the first two rounds, by the speed of his rushes; but they were nothing to the burst with which he opened the fifth round.

Before the bell rang he lay back limply in the grasp of his handlers. When, at the warning call, these turned to leave the ring, he straightened up languidly, apparently giving his whole attention to the eager words of Henry Huybers at his ear.

Then the gong sounded—and Moran sprang. He was on the champion and fighting, before the seconds could withdraw the pails and stools from the corners, before the referee had finished hanging his towel on the post.

Carpentier, not yet in position, tried to duck under his arm; but Moran uppercut him in the mouth, and followed this blow with a savage chop to the neck.

Carpentier, bending forward and covering, staggered away.

Moran was after and on him with the instant ferocity of a Bengal tiger, hitting with right and left.

Carpentier dodged, and ran. He swung, all erect, back against the ropes, and caught a terrific short right in the mouth. Then, however, as he reeled away, Moran loosed a right swing that went wild. This gave the Frenchman his opportunity to slip in close and clinch; which he promptly did.

In vain Moran tried to elbow him off and work at his body. Carpentier clung tight. Moran hooked twice to the kidney, but was stopped by the referee, who was struggling,

at first without success, to separate the men. Carpentier held close, his chin resting on Moran's shoulder, breathing deeply and waiting for the recovery that was only a matter of time.

Finally the referee succeeded in wrenching the Frenchman away; and, in doing so, passed between the men, evidently with the idea of holding Moran off until Carpentier could get his footing.

Again the American rushed in. But Carpentier had partially recovered, and managed to weather the storm of blows—managed even, after a brief moment of purely defensive tactics, to begin returning them.

That was the amazing thing about these men—their capacity for taking punishment, their immense recuperative power.

Moran relaxed somewhat. It was plain enough that no man could hold for long his pace of the last half minute. He had planned to trick the Frenchman, and, by catching him off his guard, score a sudden knockout. The trick had been partly successful. The Frenchman would be the weaker in later rounds for the beating he had received. But the knockout blow had not landed. It was time now for something else.

Accordingly he fell again to sparring and boxing. And the round was nearly over before the Frenchman exhibited even a momentary flash of his former speed and skill.

After this, for four rounds, until the middle of the ninth, the fight was less eventful. Moran was perhaps content that he had laid a strong foundation for the task he must accomplish during the latter part of the fight. Certainly neither was so fast now. There were moments of hard fighting, of course, but even Hilda could see that they lacked the ferocity of the earlier encounters. She even

found herself settling back and watching the contest with a cool eye. At first it had seemed as if something vaguely dreadful might happen at any moment. Now it appeared that nothing very dreadful was imminent. Mindful of the long route ahead of them, the two men protected themselves with greater care.

And from round to round they slowed perceptibly. Their work was more methodical, more like the business Blink had told her that fighting was. Each was battering at the other's body. Little by little they were wearing each other down. Now and then one or the other would take advantage of some opening and shoot a blow at the jaw. But neither fell. . . . And Hilda could see now that they were very workmanlike, each in his own way. Moran still relied on the force of his blows; Carpentier on the speed and number of his. The Frenchman was the lighter on his feet. His dodging was, at times, really extraordinary. Once, when Moran caught him out of position, his face unguarded, he dodged three successive blows, well-aimed blows, by merely jerking his head from side to side. . . . Carpentier could deliver his blows from any position. He had a remarkable knack for shooting forward just when he appeared to be in full retreat. Once or twice he gave Moran some trouble by this device, quite surprising him.

But in spite of occasional interesting moments, these rounds were rather monotonous. It was boxing and milling, boxing and milling, grinding each other down.

In the ninth, however, Carpentier, fearful perhaps that this long-continued point making might work out to his disadvantage, changed his tactics and began working in to fight at close quarters. He would rush in so close and so hard that his body followed his blows. He seemed to strike

with elbows and shoulders as well as fists; and more than once his head struck Moran's chin with force.

The American met these attacks with straight lefts, together with an occasional uppercut. He appeared to be holding his own reasonably well. Indeed, as Mrs. Huybers pointed out, he seemed to keep himself well in hand, permitting the Frenchman to do most of the work. Though from the occasional change of expression on Moran's face, and his sudden counter attacks, it was evident that Carpentier was landing many effective body blows at close quarters.

The tenth round was even sharper than the ninth. The men were fighting hard now. There could be no doubt about that. And Moran was shifting his attack from the body to the head. It was dreadful, to Hilda, the ruthlessness with which he battered that attractive face. Carpentier's right eye was nearly closed now. And the next few blows were aimed at the left eye. Unmistakably Moran was working to cripple temporarily the Frenchman's vision. He was so intent on this process, indeed, that he took many body blows that he might have blocked in order to land on the face.

"He's taking chances—he sure is taking chances," mused Mrs. Huybers aloud. "Or else he's sure the Frog's cork is pulled. You better go easy, Blink. He ain't licked yet, that feller!"

One of these body blows, sure enough, landed with a force that shook Moran's strong frame. But he drove his next blow home with no apparent loss of power, and when his glove came away from that other eye it left a raw stain behind it that puffed rapidly into a livid swelling.

So ended the tenth round. Hilda's shoulders moved in

an involuntary little shudder as she sank back in her chair. She was enduring this spectacle. But she wished it was over. . . . Ten rounds more—unless there should be a knockout!

Surely she was dreaming! Surely this was not the brisk matter-of-fact Hilda Wilson sitting here!

She looked up again. They were working on the Frenchman's eyes with cloths and a sponge. She turned away. Moran was limp in his chair, with four men manipulating his muscles and drenching him with water. She recalled that the body masseur invariably met him, as he returned to his corner after a round, with a shock of ice-water, thrown into his face from a sponge.

Again that gong!

Hilda wished some one would wrench it from its post and throw it out the window. She knew she would be hearing that gong in her sleep for twenty years to come. It seemed the clanging brutal knell of all her girlish quality —all her womanliness—all her better feelings. She had let it into her life for good, that gong and all the ugly, gambling, bruising, distressingly physical world of which it was the symbol.

This time Moran started the fighting. He shot left and right to those livid eyes.

Hilda could have covered her own eyes with her hands. She could have even screamed out, calling on Blink to let those eyes alone. But she only sat very still; not flushed now, but pale; a beautiful woman in a gown from Callot's, about her shoulders an opera wrap of old rose lined and fringed with snowy fur—a pale beautiful woman, looking quietly at a fight.

Carpentier fought back. But his direction was not so good; several of his blows missed altogether.

Moran rushed him again, with almost the speed and ferocity of the first and second rounds. He shot left and right to the head. He uppercut to the stomach, taking heavy blows almost casually as he closed in. Then, just before Carpentier, groping for him, could clinch, he brought his right hand up and over, like lightning, to the side of his opponent's jaw.

It was the blow of the evening. They were near the ropes at the moment, and Carpentier shot through them, clean out of the ring, and fell sprawling on the reporters' table beside it, even on the reporters themselves.

The audience was up like a tidal wave. Hilda put her hands over her ears, for the sudden noise hurt them.

The bruised sweaty man was struggling there on the ledge that served for a table. Many hands were helping him to rise.

Moran had drawn back and whirled around, walking to the farther side of the ring. Every one was watching the efforts of the reporters, the seconds, and the referee to get the champion back through the ropes—every one but Hilda. After the first thrilling instant, she watched Moran. She saw him turn slowly around, there on the opposite side of the ring. He was holding his right hand against his body, pressing it there with his left. His lips were compressed, his jaws set, his eyes suddenly wild. The bunches of muscle at the sides of his face stood out sharply from blocked-in shadows.

Hilda suddenly remembered what he had said one evening about the danger of a fighter hurting his hands. Perhaps he had injured his. She studied him anxiously, after they had got the champion back into the ring. It was reassuring to see that the hurt look had left his eyes. And he fell naturally into his fighting crouch.

She waited then to see if he would use his right hand. The Frenchman seemed hardly able to keep his feet. The fickle crowd, still on its feet, was clamoring and screaming for a knockout. But Moran, with the world waiting there at his feet, merely sparred and boxed a little, mostly with his left, while Henry Huybers shouted at him in frantic desperation of spirit to "Slip it over now, Blink! Let him have it, boy!"

Mrs. Huybers, red and breathless, with staring eyes, suddenly plunged forward, shouting in the general direction of her lord and super-parasite—"Send him in, Henry. Let him have the haymaker!"

Huybers, without turning his head, angrily waved her away. And Hilda caught her arm and drew her back to her chair.

The haymaker was not forthcoming. Moran merely feinted and boxed. Slowly the champion recovered; and, all battered though he was, at the bell he was working nearly as briskly as ever, now dancing forward and feinting with his shoulders and head, now dancing away only to dart back and shoot in light jabs to head and body, thereby adding materially to his already large collection of points. From somewhere back in the crowd came the distinct sound of hisses and boos.

After the round there was a curious buzz of talk throughout the hall—of rather quiet talk. All were discussing the odd turn the fight had taken. They did not know what to make of it. Moran had had the fight in his hands; but for some reason he had weakened and let the Frenchman stay. Hilda caught bits of one argument in which an Englishman was overwhelming an ardent fellow countryman of her own by shouting out that Moran was yellow—just plain yellow, and that was all there was to it.

Others were hinting at crooked work. The fight had been fixed. There had been an advance agreement to the effect that Carpentier should receive the decision, in consideration of an extra payment to Moran. One Englishman knew this. A friend of his had seen the documents.

Hilda noted that Moran, once in his corner, let his head drop limply back and closed his eyes. He looked very bad, she thought—exhausted, perhaps in pain.

She saw Henry feel his right hand and ask excited questions. Then she saw Blink jerk the hand away, shake his head wearily and grope for the water bottle with his left hand.

Then the twelfth round came; and the thirteenth—and on, straight along to the twentieth and the final bell. The fight was curiously monotonous from this point to the end. There was no more leading from Moran; he merely defended himself, and scored such points as he could with his left.

Carpentier grew steadily stronger. In the nineteenth and twentieth he was so vigorous in his attack that Moran frequently resorted to clinching. He was holding on when the last bell rang; and turned away to his corner with an expression of relief.

There was a great bustle of excitement about the ring.

The referee drew Carpentier back to the middle and held up his right arm, turning him slowly around so that all might acclaim the victor.

Moran came forward to congratulate him, but extended his left hand instead of his right. For a moment the two fighters conversed. The referee joined them. Then Henry Huybers rushed up and very officiously, talking all the time, set about taking off Moran's right glove.

Hilda saw Moran's face actually whiten as Henry pulled

off the soggy glove and unwound the bandage. Then the three men examined the hand closely. And then Carpentier, with a very friendly manner, slipped his arm through Moran's and led him to his corner.

The crowd seemed to understand. Several hundred had pressed forward to the ring; there were even a few faint cheers.

"No good going out yet," observed Mrs. Huybers, after commenting volubly on the outcome of the fight. "We got to wait for 'em."

So she and Hilda sat there while the fighters left the arena for their dressing-rooms and the crowd slowly melted away. The sporting gentlemen swarmed about them, as before the fight. Several of these now endeavored to make themselves agreeable to Hilda; but she gave them little more than cool civility. One claimed to have precise news from the front. Moran, he said, had sprained his wrist as a result of that terrific blow in the eleventh round. All the men seemed to agree that Blink, despite his technical defeat, had won a new position through his work of the evening. He had shown himself Carpentier's master until his fatal right was injured; and after that he had kept his feet, alert and strong, to the very end.

"This'll mean some big matches for Blink," observed the very agreeable card player.

"But," observed Hilda, "surely this injury will interfere with that?"

The card player shrugged his shoulders. "In a few months he will be all right. It is nothing."

Hilda was glad when the party finally moved toward the door. She felt rather weak. And she was conscious of a distinctly unhealthy interest in herself on the part of these

uniformly shrewd and suave men. There could not be the slightest doubt as to what was in their minds regarding her. It was a situation from which she would be glad to escape. Certainly this little world was one to which her nature was not adapted.

It would be a relief to be with Blink again. She had felt something near terror of him before he was injured, when he was fighting with cool merciless ferocity. But Blink hurt was another person. The mothering instinct, that had been so deeply and strangely stirred in her of late, was welling up now, full and strong.

Still, she was confused. It seemed to her now that she had gone too far with him in the taxi coming out here. She should not have let her emotions overrun her in that way. Certainly it was wrong to give Blink the faintest right to expect . . . for there were problems, a horrid little tangle of them . . . and a woman's life is not to be turned lightly aside; not in the case of a grown woman like herself. A woman's life is a delicate and complex thing, making always its own insistent demands.

As she waited, standing in the shadows beside the outer gate, with an effort keeping up with the talk of a man at each elbow, her spirits sank. She would have given anything for a few hours by herself. That mothering instinct was still strong in her, as was her genuine fondness for the Blink she had known. But she still felt the shock of that first view of the merciless fighting savage in the ring. And she was very tired.

He came then, with the important little Henry Huybers beside him, still talking excitedly, still exhibiting intricate structures of gold in his cavernous mouth. . . . Blink appeared refreshingly like himself—his face a bit flushed,

a discernible bruise over his cheek-bone, his right hand heavily bandaged, but again in his immaculate evening costume.

He was silent, moody. The eager questions of the sporting gentlemen he met with monosyllables, with the air of one who brushes small creatures away. A very few moments, and he had said good night and guided Hilda to the curb, raising his bandaged right hand toward the cab rank in mid-avenue.

Hilda glanced back, just before she stepped into the taxi. Then she felt the color come rushing to her cheeks. They were all standing motionless—Henry, Mrs. Huybers and the sporting persons—watching the great Blink Moran lead her away. It was close to midnight; and it was Paris!

A trace of the recklessness she had felt in the early evening rose within her, as she nodded a final good night and, with compressed lips, entered the car. Moran gave the address—their address, hers and his—to the chauffeur and stepped in after her, dropping heavily at her right hand.

"Blink," she cried softly, moved to talk a great deal, and rapidly, "what happened? You are hurt, I know."

He sat for a moment in moody silence, then reached out, found a slim gloved hand, and crushed it in his left hand.

"Well," he said, "I didn't do it."

"Oh, but, Blink, you were hurt!"

"It's all in the game, Hilda. One way or the other, I didn't make good. The hand is broken."

Hilda's emotions were distressingly confused. She could not think clearly. He was not a savage now; but her Blink, a fallen warrior, very human. He was hurting her hand; but she could not decide to withdraw it. Besides, she had given him the right . . . or *had* she?

Then, without warning, out of her muddled feelings, rose a picture—rose swift and clear—a picture of a tall, rather gaunt man, slightly bent but strong, with sad deepset eyes in a gray face—standing in the shadows of a station platform; a man who gripped the handle of his suit-case in one hand, his umbrella in the other, and looked after her as the train rolled away. Again it occurred to her that she had never so much as known the name of that station in Pennsylvania where she had last seen Harris Doreyn.

She could have cried out. Must she renounce the very thought of love in order to forget that man? Was this lost love the unfading shadow of her life? Did all the roads of feeling lead to him in her heart?

She wondered—her mind still swift and clear—what he would think of her now. He was not far away, only a few hours by train and channel boat and train again. Perhaps he had actually come to Paris—who could say?

In desperation, in sheer longing for human companionship, she returned the pressure of Blink's hand.

For a long moment they sat thus. The taxi was circling the great, shadowy Arc de Triomphe and skimming down the Champs Elysées.

Blink's hand trembled. He jerked it away. Before she fully realized what was taking place, her head was nestled in the hollow of his arm, his bandaged broken hand was forcing up her chin.

She struggled, and tried to speak. He seemed not even to know that she was resisting him.

His lips met hers, pressed upon them.

She struggled and fought, blindly. She could not get her breath. She was suddenly crying. She caught at the bandaged hand, tore it away; then cowered low in the cor-

ner of the seat, covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

She made an effort to control herself. She did not know what was the matter with her. She was all to pieces.

She sat up.

He was leaning back, looking down and nursing his bandaged hand.

She touched his arm. "Oh, Blink," she managed to say, "I have hurt you. I didn't mean—I didn't know what I was doing."

He made no reply, nor did he raise his eyes.

The silence deepened. She stared out the window, gripping the sill tightly with both hands. Finally she leaned back and let her hands fall limp in her lap.

"I don't blame you for being angry with me, Blink," her voice said. "I haven't been fair with you . . . I didn't mean to be unfair. I didn't know. But"—she could not look at him, nor could she speak steadily—"but I'm afraid. . . . I'm afraid I do know now, Blink."

Still he was silent.

"I want to talk to you about it. Perhaps I can explain. It would help if I could even explain to myself. . . . We're nearly home, Blink. I don't want you to go. Not yet. Come up with me, and let me try to talk. You see—I don't want you to go—leaving it like this."

XIX

IN WHICH HILDA AND BLINK CONCLUDE THAT IT HAS BEEN A GOOD DEAL OF AN EVENING, TAKING IT BY AND LARGE

SO THEY mounted the stairway together. Hilda unlocked her door. He followed her in, still silent, on tiptoe.

The electric light was dim, still wrapped in that colored tissue-paper that Hilda had placed there so many weeks ago . . . weeks or years. Adele's door was closed. This was odd.

Blink was having difficulty in getting his overcoat off. Hilda lent a hand, and threw the coat on the bed.

"Sit down, Blink," she said. And herself dropped wearily into a chair. "Adele has evidently gone to bed."

She rubbed her cheeks with her two hands; then tried, without great success, to smile. "I'm awfully tired, Blink," she said.

He looked at her now.

"Aren't you too tired to talk, Hilda?"

She shook her head. "No—I've got to talk. Now—before I even try to sleep. You see, Blink, more is happening to me than you could possibly know. I'm at the crossroads. It looks like the climax of things for me. I haven't realized it before—not fully. I don't believe it really got to me until—well, in the cab there, when—when you kissed me."

"I oughtn't to have done that. But you see—"

She spread out her hands, in a gesture that seemed to have despair in it. "Don't explain, Blink. Please! You were all right. I'm not going to play the woman about that. The thing I want to say is that I haven't meant to be unfair. I was drifting. I was all at sea. I've grown very fond of you. Yes, I have, Blink! You know that well enough."

He inclined his head in sober assent to this.

She leaned forward and let her chin fall into the palm of her hand. He studied her gloomily. She seemed to him the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. And she was so downright honest—amazing in a woman. A man like Blink expects charm from beautiful women, but not honesty, never honesty. He saw her then, and all at once, as a remote inaccessible creature.

"I oughtn't to have done it," he repeated.

She ignored the remark this time. "You see, Blink, it all appears to come down to this—I can't marry you."

He lowered his eyes, and was silent.

"I simply can't, Blink. It is out of the question. Right at this minute I almost wish I could. But I can't."

"It's the fight did that," he said.

"Perhaps that was part of it. Oh, Blink, why, why did you keep at his eyes that way!"

"That was legitimate, Hilda. I saw an advantage there, and took it."

Hilda suppressed a physical impulse to shudder as she had shuddered at the ringside; then pressed on. "But no, the fight isn't all. Not by any means. Unless in the sense that it stirred me to the point where I've simply had to stop short and think. No it's more—a lot more. . . . Blink, I can't marry at all. There has never been but one

man I could really have married. I had to run away from him to save myself. . . . I'm not a cold thing, Blink. I have feelings. I'm human. You are attractive to me—more attractive than you could possibly know. But being with you in this intimate way just makes me keep thinking more and more about love—not marriage, Blink, but love. . . . Oh, what am I talking about? This is all beside the question. It just comes down to the fact that I am very, very fond of you, Blink, but I am perfectly sure that I couldn't marry you.

"That's a practical matter, Blink. We're not enough alike. We haven't enough in common. Surely you can see that. Our worlds lie a million miles apart. Now you, Blink, you ought to marry—but not an independent business woman like me, a woman with fixed habits and trained abilities. I couldn't give everything up and settle down to keep house for a man. I'd rust. I'd die. Perhaps, if it was a very big house that needed a lot of managing and a social position that called for tact and energy and more managing—perhaps I could do that. But even that way, I have my doubts. You see, I've worked too long. I have built up too much. In a way I'm too much of a person, Blink."

Then her tone softened. Tears came to her eyes which he did not see, but he heard something akin to them in her voice.

"Here is the thing that disturbs me so . . . I've spoken of the one man I love. Blink, that was years ago. Time and again I thought that affair all outgrown and forgotten. The queer thing is that it wasn't forgotten at all. It wasn't even weaker in my life. Those times, my relief from the suffering it brought me, meant nothing more than that I was busy, and interested in other things, and was

getting along pretty well without any love in my life. I thought my work would be everything to me. But it isn't. I was wrong . . . All this experience lately—going stale on my job and having to give it up—letting you and the baby into my life—it has simply started me to thinking about love again and—and then it all comes back—all the old torment that used to hurt so, that I fought so hard to live down. Don't you see, Blink, I can't think about love without thinking about Harris Doreyn."

Blink raised his eyes. "Oh," he asked—"of Chicago?"

She nodded. Her eyes were swimming with tears. She was biting her lip.

"You've spoken of him before, once or twice. I remember now. I know who he is, of course. He's a big man."

"Yes," said she, "he is a big man."

"Why did you have to run away from him, Hilda? Was he married?"

"Yes, he was—is—married. So you see, Blink, I can't even think about it. Marriage—love—I must shut all thought of them out of my life. Maybe you won't quite understand that, Blink. You don't know what these things mean to us women. We suffer so. We have to shut our minds tight against things that hurt us, or we can't live. We *have* to . . . there's just one thing for me now—if I can only keep the baby! There will be pain in that as well as a sort of happiness; but it is so much better than an empty life."

Then she fell silent. After a moment she went over to the basket and sat where she could watch the coverlet move gently with the baby's breathing.

She looked up, and said, very gently, "Oh, Blink, will you help me keep her?"

"I'll do what I can, Hilda," he replied.

"You see, it's one thing that really grips me. I've just got to have it. A woman needs love, Blink, and—motherhood. She *needs* them. Oh, you men don't know how a woman—a woman like me—feels about children. It just hurts—hurts! I've been cheated. And now it is too late. I've made my life into something else now—it is too late. I'm a worker bee, Blink. I've got to go on being a worker bee, until I die. But oh, if only—just in this half sort of way—well, it would be the next best thing. I've just got to have it. I don't dare think what would become of me if baby should be taken away now. Maybe I'd go to pieces, just as Stanley Aitcheson told the people at the store. Like those Americans in Paris we talked about the first day I met you, Blink, maybe I would 'blow up.' . . . Say you'll help me out in this, Blink."

"I'll do what I can," he said again.

He rose, and moved lightly to the window. On his way he glanced at something on the bureau. For a moment he stood looking down into the dim silent street. Then, with knit brows, he turned back to the bureau, and picked up a folded paper.

"Did you see this, Hilda?"

She glanced up slowly, shaking her head.

"It's Adele's writing."

He handed it to her; then, after a moment's thought, went to Adele's door, tapped on it, opened it and looked in. Then he reached in and switched on the light.

"Hilda," he said—"she's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes. Her things aren't here."

Hilda followed him into the room. Together they looked in the wardrobe, in bureau drawers, in the closet. Then they returned to Hilda's room, she fingering the letter.

She stood under the light to read it; then passed it over to him.

"My dear Hilda,"—so ran the letter—"I am sorry to leave the baby alone but I don't dare wait any longer. It is eleven o'clock and you will be home pretty soon. Will wants me to leave before you come. I suppose he is right.

"Yes, I am going back to him. I don't suppose there is any good talking any more about it. Dancing is my business and it is the only thing I can do. I have cost you a good deal of money I know. Some of it I can never pay back, but I know how much the room and the meals are and I'm going to pay that back as soon as I can save the money, which may take me quite a little while, but I can only ask you to be as patient as you can with me, and thank you for being so kind to me as well as baby.

"This is all now. From yours respectfully,

"Adele Rainey."

They stood for a little time, each thinking the matter over in his own way.

"She has been so quiet," Hilda mused aloud, "I never thought of this."

"Harper's been at her," said Blink. "He put her up to it, all right."

"But the poor child, Blink! We can't let her go like this!"

"I know," said he, walking over to the window. Then, "Harper has done this. He can't get work without her, that's what's the matter with him. He put these ideas into her head."

Hilda was standing quite motionless, her fingers pressed against her eyes. She looked up now, studying Blink's broad back.

"No, that doesn't altogether explain it," she said. "There

is something else. She has been very unhappy. She despises that boy."

"Yes," Blink agreed, "she does that."

"She just got discouraged and gave up. The poor child! And I wasn't awake to what was going on."

"You've done a lot," was Blink's comment. He was still gazing out the window. "Of course you couldn't go on very long taking care of her like this. As she says, dancing is her business."

They were silent again.

Hilda spoke first, crisply: "Blink, we've got to find that child."

"To-night?"

"Yes, now."

He turned now. "But what are you going to do with her?"

"We'll figure that out later. Maybe I'll send her back home. I don't know. But we can't let her go like this."

He thought this over. His deliberation was exasperating.

"I'll handle it, Blink. Just leave it to me. But I can't very well knock around Paris alone. It is nearly one o'clock in the morning."

He went right on visibly thinking. At length he said—

"They'll have his address at the Parnasse. The supper show is on now. If Courbon is there he will let me have it. I can run them down in no time. You'd better wait here, Hilda."

"Not for a minute," was Hilda's only reply to this. She reached for her wraps, took her purse from the table and left the hotel by his side.

There is never an hour of the night in Paris when one may not find a cruising taxi. Moran hailed one in the Rue Tronchet; and in no time they were outside the gay

music-hall in the Boulevard des Capucines. He left her in the cab, and entered alone. In a very few moments he returned, and gave an address to the chauffeur.

The car turned off the boulevard, now at its brightest with the night life that to so many is Paris, and threaded dark streets toward the neighborhood of the Gare St. Lazare. It slipped past the great station, with its terminal hotel, and entered another dark street. It turned in before one of innumerable six-story houses, and stopped.

"Will you wait in the car?" asked Blink.

"No, I'm coming in," said Hilda.

A small sign beside the door announced this particular house as the Hotel de l'Univers—Chauffage centrale—English spoken.

Moran rang the bell. They stood waiting. The building was wholly dark. Again and again he rang.

Finally they heard a stirring about within, and the shooting of bolts. Hilda felt in her purse.

The door opened a little way. A small middle-aged Frenchman stood there, holding the door with one hand and his garments with the other.

Moran addressed him in French. The hotel keeper replied, hesitatingly at first, then, as Blink added further remarks, volubly.

Hilda caught a few familiar words and phrases. It was too late. Monsieur et Madame could not be disturbed at such an hour. They must wait until to-morrow.

Hilda held out a gold coin. The man looked at it, struggled for a moment with his fine French thrift, then took it and opened the door—cautioning them to be quiet and make no disturbance. Moran translated in a few words.

The man let them in, and disappeared to add a touch to his wardrobe. Then he led the way up winding stairs.

They ascended flight after flight, to the fourth or fifth floor. At the end of the dimly lighted hall the proprietor stopped, indicating a door leading to a rear room.

Moran tapped.

Hilda distinctly heard a movement inside. But there was no response.

Moran tapped again—and again.

They heard a low sound, as if the boy was involuntarily clearing his throat.

Again Moran tapped.

Then, at last, they heard him approaching the door, very slowly.

The door was unlocked, then opened a few inches. Moran instantly put his foot in it; and opened it wider.

But force was not necessary. Young Harper, in shirt-sleeves and minus his collar, stood before them, gaunt and white, with black circles under his eyes. There was no light in the room. He must have been sitting there in the dark. His eyes, over bright, stared at them. His hand shook as it gripped the edge of the door. He was a scared thing—an abject thing. And his appearance conveyed alarming suggestions.

"Is she here?" asked Moran.

Harper did not reply; he merely swallowed.

"Turn on your light," Moran commanded.

Harper seemed unable to move.

Moran turned to the landlord, uttering the same command in French. That person, plainly alarmed, looked uncertainly from one to another; then decided to obey.

Hilda caught a whiff of a queer odor from the room. She sniffed it, in some uncertainty; then exclaiming, "Why, it is chloroform!" slipped past the three men into the room.

Across the bed, still in her overcoat, lay the slim person of Adele. Her hat was off—was on the floor, in fact, near the foot of the bed. Her hair was rumpled.

Hilda bent over her and drew away the limp forearm that lay across her face. She was breathing.

Moran was at her side now. At a word, he brought the water pitcher and a towel, and Hilda sponged her face with the cold water.

Hilda picked up the hat. Adele's two bags—a satchel, and a suit-case of imitation leather—stood side by side, unopened, near the door.

"Carry her down, Blink," said Hilda. "And have the man bring her things."

As Moran gathered up the inert body in his arms, rather clumsily, Hilda turned toward Will Harper, who was now leaning against the bureau, watching them with weakly defiant eyes.

"What have you been doing?" she said, sharply. "You might have killed her!"

"Killed her nothing!" replied the boy, a trace of hysteria in his voice. "Whadoyou mean, killed her! I ain't hurt her any. I was just keeping her quiet. It's her own fault. She says she'll come back to work with me, and then after she gets here she has cold feet and tries to throw me down. She's brought it on herself, I tell you. I been mighty gentle to her, if you ask me."

The others had gone. Hilda gave up, and followed.

Moran, managing awkwardly with his bandaged hand, placed Adele on the rear seat of the taxi. Hilda got in beside her and took the drooping head on her own shoulder. Moran left them thus, and returned into the hotel. Hilda called after him, but he gave no sign that he heard. She waited in some anxiety.

In a very few moments he reappeared. As he was making a place for his big frame on one of the narrow front seats, Hilda said—

"You didn't hurt him, Blink?"

He shook his head. "Nothing like that, Hilda. But I warned him. He won't trouble her again."

Hilda stroked the cheek of the unconscious girl. "The poor child!" she murmured.

They were well across the Boulevard Haussman, in the familiar Rue Tronchet, before Hilda spoke again.

"Blink," she said, "what on earth was the boy doing with chloroform in his room? Do you suppose he planned to drug her? And chloroform, of all things!"

"I don't believe he planned it," Blink replied. "He's a crazy one—likely to do most anything when he gets excited."

"But what was he doing with chloroform then?"

"Oh, he always has some around. Didn't you ever smell it, over at the hotel?"

"But why, Blink?"

Moran hesitated. "Well—I think he drinks it. He has some way of taking it."

"Drinks it?" Hilda was aghast.

"Yes. There's a lot of these music-hall people take things. Usually it's coke, or hop, or something."

Hilda did not catch the meaning of these terms of the underworld. She did not try. She was holding the girl close, stroking her cheek and thinking swift thoughts.

"Blink," she said, "you have known this all along?"

"Yes. That's why I was really glad when he ran off with Blondie, and we could take her in."

"But you were going to let her go to-night."

"I didn't see what we could do."

"Well, Blink," said Hilda, slowly and thoughtfully—they were nearing the hotel now—"I'm beginning to think I do see what we can do. We can save this child. And we're going to do it."

To which he replied—"I'm glad you feel that way about it, Hilda."

Adele was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness. When Blink was carrying her up the stairs her eyes opened, in a fluttering way. Her face was pale and pinched.

Hilda ran ahead and opened doors. He carried her in through Hilda's room, past the still sleeping baby, and laid her on her own bed. A hotel boy brought up the bags.

"We ran a risk, leaving baby like this," observed Hilda; "but it had to be done. And everything seems all right."

She sat for a short time on the edge of the bed, chafing Adele's limp wrists and stroking her forehead. Then she looked up at Moran.

"Blink," she said, "you are tired. I never saw you look like this."

"Well," said he—"it has been a good deal of an evening."

"Yes,"—she slowly nodded—"a good deal of an evening, taking it by and large . . . You go to bed now, Blink. I'm going to undress this child and make her comfortable. I think she'll be all right . . . And, Blink, I want to see you to-morrow. I'm not through talking with you—not yet. Suppose—if everything should be all right here—suppose we lunch together, over at the Lucas."

He inclined his head. He did look tired.

"Does your hand hurt much, Blink?"

"Hardly any now, since they took the glove off and gave it a chance to swell."

"I'm glad of that. I've used you mercilessly to-night. Good night, Blink."

"Good night, Hilda. Knock on my door if you need any help."

XX

HILDA, IN HER TURN, TRIES TO PUT OVER A DIFFICULT PROPOSITION; AND IS MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN ED JOHNSON WAS

ADELE was ill during most of the night, but toward daylight fell into a natural sleep. In the morning she was much better. Hilda, after lying awake until dawn, slept through the breakfast hour, and was awakened by cries from the baby. She opened her eyes to find Adele, fully dressed, heating a bottle.

She got up then, and busied herself about the room for an hour or so; then bathed the baby. When this operation was finished it was nearly noon, and high time to dress for luncheon.

Adele had little to say. And Hilda did not bring up the troubles of the night. The girl was in a humble gentle mood; and all the morning was nervously close to tears. So their occasional little conversations ranged only over the small matters that centered about the baby.

Shortly after noon Blink looked in. Hilda was waiting, hat, coat and gloves on, and joined him at once. In a few moments the urbane, English-speaking maitre d'hôtel at the Lucas had ushered them to their favorite corner, taken their order and left them to their own devices.

Hilda dropped her chin on her clasped hands, and looked across at him.

"I told you I wanted to talk, Blink. You see—we were interrupted last night. You remember. When you found Adele's note . . . Tell me—do you think me a selfish woman?"

He looked frankly surprised. "No," he said.

She mused. "I don't know. I wish I could be sure of that. If I am, it is what my work has made me. I've been trained in a rough school, Blink. I'm a good business woman. You haven't seen that side of me. I almost wish you had. You would find it easier to understand. . . . I talked rather wildly last night, I'm afraid. I hardly knew what I was saying. But you see, I had just waked up. And it was right. I had to be waked up—even if it was at your expense, Blink—even if I had been unfair to you in letting myself drift that way. I told you last night I couldn't marry you. To-day I see it even more clearly. It really is out of the question."

He met her gaze. "I know, Hilda," he replied. "I've been thinking it over, too. A man like me—a fighter, when all's said and done—couldn't make a woman like you happy. It was foolish to be thinking about it."

"Blink—please! Don't put it that way. Don't you see, I can't marry anybody. I've been nearly all night thinking it out. The time has come in my life when I've got to take myself in hand and begin facing facts." She had been speaking rapidly. Now she paused, and went on more quietly. "I seem to see it, at last, Blink. I told you something of the one man in my life. I still love him. You don't get over those things, you know—not where you have felt deeply. The mere sight of his handwriting tears my nerves to pieces even now. Sometimes I see some one on the street that walks like him, or wears clothes that look like his, and it is always—well, a sort of shock to me."

She leaned forward, frankly eager for his sympathy. "I don't know whether you have ever felt as deeply as that, Blink. If you ever have, perhaps you can understand."

He knit his brows in thought; and she watched him. "I can't say that I ever have felt just that way, Hilda," he replied, at length.

"Well, I want to tell you—the thing I am coming to see at last—even feeling that way, with all the pain and torment of that old heartbreak still in me strong, if he should come to me now and tell me that he was free to marry me, I don't believe I could say yes to him. I would love him. I could still suffer through him. But to give up my independence, give up my life to a man—stop working—stop being somebody and become Mrs. Somebody—Blink, I couldn't do it. Too much water has run under the bridge since those old days. I've changed so. As I told you last night, I've built up too much."

She mused for a little time, very soberly; then went on—

"I've seen other business women go to pieces over this problem, though I hadn't lived enough to understand it before. Some of them quit work, give up their independence, and marry. Then they fight with their husbands; and often they are too old to have children to bring them happiness. Some of them keep their work and try love without marriage. That is dreadful. You can generally tell which ones they are. They get hard, and bold. Or else, if they have any fineness, they suffer terribly. Then there are some others that just work, and suppress all their natural feelings. They grow querulous and old-maidish. Really they, most of them, lose their vitality and run off into nerves and ill-health . . . It is dreadfully puzzling. You don't find many of them that keep simple and human and go on working right through middle age. A few, of

course, but not many. Women don't seem to work it out—not as men do. Sometimes I wonder if women ever will be as big as men."

He was painstakingly following her through this outbreak. He thought it would do her good to get it, as he mentally phrased it, out of her system.

"It doesn't look like an easy problem," he observed.

"It is anything but easy, Blink."

"And you seem to be right in it."

"That is where I am."

"Well"—it was his turn to muse—"what are you going to do? Do you know?"

She nodded; and compressed her lips for a brief moment before replying. "I'm going to work, Blink—finish up my vacation—it has been a queer sort of vacation!—and then go straight back to the job. I shall never act with another man as I have acted with you. I know now that it is selfish and unfair. A woman mustn't let a man begin to make love to her unless she is prepared to give—and give without bargaining."

"Yes," said he, "I suppose that's only right. But if you're going back to work this way, aren't you just picking one of the three things you say are—I think you said that was dreadful."

"It's the least disastrous of the three, I think," she said. "It is along the line of my habits. And it makes the least trouble for other people. Besides, my plan isn't so simple as that." She hesitated. A warm glow came into her eyes. A faint wistful smile fluttered at the corners of her mouth. "You are forgetting baby," she added then, very softly and a thought huskily. "I am counting on her to keep me human. That is the only thought that gives me courage to face all I've got to go through."

He dwelt on this. The entrée had come; he gave it his attention. When he did speak, it was to say—"You don't know how good it feels to break training and eat a little regular food."

But she was still watching him. "Blink," she said, "I know what is in your mind."

"Well," said he, "you know we haven't worked that business out with Juliette."

"I know. But I'm sure she will see it when she realizes all I can do for baby. I've quit worrying about what the people at home will say. I shall have fight enough on my hands anyway, without manufacturing new difficulties. I'm going to give my life to this, Blink. I'm going to give her a training and an education that will make your Juliette proud and glad for her."

It had, as Blink in his own way had surmised, done Hilda good to talk out her troubles. As the meal progressed her tense nerves relaxed. She gradually became conscious of the crowd about them and of the gay chatter. She watched Blink's awkward attempts to use his right hand, and herself cut up his meat for him.

And from being a curiously ingenious egotist, she little by little became a friendly and briskly observing table companion. Finally, when the individual coffee-pots had been brought, and their thoughts were released from all the engrossing little matters of the table, she gave him another of the direct friendly looks that he found so pleasantly characteristic of her, and said—

"I really dragged you here for something very different from what you have heard, Blink. Up to now we have done nothing but talk about me. What I really want to do is to talk about you."

He exhibited no surprise; merely sipped his coffee,

looked about the still crowded room and waited for her to continue.

And Hilda, on her part, studied him for a little while. She had a definite task in hand. It had first come to her in the early hours of the morning, when they were bringing Adele back. Since then, during every waking moment, the thought of this task had been stirring in what she often referred to as the back of her head.

As is the case with every man or woman who has been trained to handle executive problems, and who has that touch of creative imagination that is so necessary to any except purely routine work, Hilda, in her best moments, was conscious of thinking and feeling on many planes at once, and of talking one thing while feeling and puzzling out another. Her color was rising a little now; partly because it always did rise when she was stirred to think and act, and partly because of sheer excitement that she again felt the impulse to think and act. Indeed, the stir of creative energy that had been consistently so strong in her during the highly creative years of her early business success was strong in her again. She felt herself again rising to a difficult situation—the sensation, of all sensations, that she perhaps best loved. She sat there, very quietly indeed, fingering the little coffee spoon, and looking calmly at the man who had come so closely into her life and whom she now purposed disposing of definitely and finally. She was altogether conscious, as she watched him, that her mind was going to be too keen and swift for his. She could, as she might have phrased it, think rings around him. And she had, quite suddenly—which was the way in which it always came to her when she was "going well"—perfect confidence in the accuracy of her perceptions and the soundness of her logic.

She had him at last. She knew now, as well as one mere human could know another, just about the sort of man he was. She was finding the relation between the Blink of the Hotel de l'Amerique, the Blink of all those intimate hours in her own room, and the great, beautiful, ferocious Moran of the prize ring—the man who was savage enough, businesslike enough, to find his opponent's weakness and then deliberately hurt him there, and game enough to fight through nine hard rounds with a broken hand, without so much as admitting the trouble to his own backers . . . He was, in the last analysis, a rugged man, gifted with a wonderful body, strong natural moral courage and virtually no imagination. He was kindly, even sweet-natured. He was—well, a dear. But he was also, when all was said and done, a fighter; slow of mind except in the one craft he had mastered. As he grew older he would be steady, thrifty, strong; and probably stubborn. He would go his own way, because he would be slow to grasp the possibilities of any other way. He definitely lacked qualities that were becoming more and more necessary to Hilda. When he married, and in his mind and feelings "settled down," he would surely be conservative regarding his wife —not from any selfish desire to limit her growth, but because he would never know how to be anything else . . . Yet, with all this, he was the second most attractive man that had ever come into her life.

She did not dare dwell on his attractiveness, however. Already she felt that she was, in turning him away irrevocably, giving up something very fine and sweet and friendly. She was facing a terrible loneliness. She would have to face it. Like him, she would have to be game. For the combination of finely simple friendliness with great physical attractiveness was one that might overcome the

judgment of the strongest woman, should her loneliness grow deep enough.

"Blink," she said thoughtfully, "you ought to marry."

He mused over this; then replied, very simply, "I know it."

"And you ought to marry a simple domestic sort of woman, Blink—one that would make your home attractive and take good care of you. Don't pick out a woman with nerves or an imagination. You wouldn't be happy with her. And you deserve to be happy."

He brooded, without replying.

"One of these days, Blink, you must go back home. Don't stay too long over here."

"I know," said he. "I've thought about that. Of course, if the stabilizer makes good—you know, that new aeroplane concern I have a little money in—why, my business would be here, for a while, anyway. But I've thought lately I'd like to buy a little place not too far from New York—out on Long Island, maybe, or over in Jersey—where I could have a few acres, and raise a little garden stuff. I was a country boy, you know. And I'd probably want to keep a few bees. I sort of like 'em around, I know their ways so well. And it gives you an excuse for raising flowers. I like flowers."

Hilda raised her coffee spoon a little, turning it slowly over and over, and studying it.

"Blink," she said, "I suppose there's a time in the life of any man—or woman, either, for that matter—when he ought to marry, if he means to at all. If he wants to make a success of it."

"Yes," said he, "that's so, of course."

"You know what I mean, Blink." She raised her eyes. "I couldn't say this to a young boy, or girl. But it's true,

just the same. There is love—that's one thing. And marriage—well that may be the same thing, or it may not. I'm not saying that it isn't, you understand."

"I know," said he. "There's a lot of practical considerations about marriage. The French have a pretty good understanding of that."

She slowly nodded. "Now about you, Blink. You have told me of your feeling for me. You mustn't think I fail to understand it and appreciate it. And I've told you my situation exactly. But just for the moment—and counting on you to understand how fond I am of you, and how much you have meant to me and do mean to me now—I want to look at all this as if I were out of it altogether. May I tell you exactly what is in my mind?"

"Yes, I wish you would."

"Well"—she knit her brows and compressed her lips; then went straight on—"you see, Blink, you are a pretty steady sort of man. You don't fly off the handle. You have a wonderful knack for friendship. You're a wonderful companion. You have simple tastes . . . Blink, I think you're exactly the sort of man that needs marriage and a home much more than you need to be all burned out by what we call love."

He lowered his eyes. He looked very sober. She recalled, suddenly, the story Adele had told her of the French girl who had spent his savings, years back, and then run off to South America.

"I've been through that once," he said, without looking up.

"Well, Blink—I'm going to give my opinion about you now—straight from the shoulder . . . You won't mind?"

"Go ahead, Hilda."

"I want to see you married, Blink. Soon—real soon. You're ready. You need a home, and you need companionship. You can afford it. And I want to see you married to some quiet simple girl, who will appreciate you and devote her life to you."

For a little time he continued studying the table-cloth. His face was expressionless. Hilda, very quiet, very sure of herself, watched him.

He lifted his solid head. His eyes met hers, and found them extraordinarily strong and steady. Just for a fraction of a second his own gaze wavered. It was the first time she had ever seen such a sign in him. Instantly the old swelling sense of power rose within her. "Love," she thought again, as she had thought once when talking with the bewildered Stanley Aitcheson, "is not always personal." And suddenly, with a sharp little twist at her heart, came the added thought that sometimes, on the other hand, it is deeply, terribly personal.

"Hilda," he said now, "I think I know what you're thinking of."

She offered no reply; but her eyes were steadily on him.

"You're thinking of Adele."

"Yes," she said bluntly, "I'm thinking of Adele."

He considered this. "Of course," said he, "I won't say I haven't thought of that, one time and another. Never very definitely. . . . There's one thing you say about me I know is so. I would get along best with a steady woman. And I do want a home."

She nodded.

"Of course," he continued, "if Adele wanted me—"

"Blink, she's heart and soul in love with you. She has been, all the time. I was blind—and selfish. I can see it now. That is just what is the matter with her."

"—if Adele wanted me," he went on, rather stubbornly, "it would solve her problems. It *is* hard to see just what's to become of her, as things stand now."

Hilda met this statement with emphasis. "Nothing of the sort, Blink. I told you I would be responsible for Adele. Well, I will be. I am not unloading that problem on you, and never shall. I have let you see, frankly enough, how I feel. You and I can't go on, for the reasons I have just told you. Add to that, I have at last admitted to myself that I love another man, whom I can never marry—therefore I can not marry at all, without surrendering the last shreds of my self-respect . . . Which disposes of my part in your life, excepting, Blink, as, I think, a lifelong friend. Now, on the other hand, here you are, not a crazy boy, not a romantic enthusiast, but a mature practical man, ready to settle down, in need of companionship and—yes, love. And here is Adele, a good girl—"

The phrase came without thought; but the sound of the words made her pause an instant. Her standards, her judgments, had changed of late!

"Yes," said Blink, "she's a good girl."

"She is even tempered, modest, capable—"

"She's all of that, Hilda."

"—and she is eating her heart out for you."

Blink thought and thought.

"I wonder—" he began, after a bit, then closed his lips on the rest of it.

Hilda watched him, without further words. She had stated her proposition. He would think it over; and would either accept it or would not.

"Suppose," he said, a little later, "it shouldn't turn out this way. Suppose Adele and I shouldn't marry. What's

to become of her then? What's your plan? Have you got any?"

"Certainly. I shall take her along with me as a companion. She could help take care of baby and me. It would be easy to make her feel that she is paying her way. As a matter of fact, I'm beginning to wonder how on earth I'm going to manage without her. Then, when I go back home, she shall come with me. And I'll stand by her until she is fixed, one way or another. If it should come to that, I could get her work in the store."

She could see him deliberately thinking all this out. Then, when he had mentally arranged it to his satisfaction, he looked up, and smiled.

It was a fine smile—direct, friendly, quite unself-conscious.

Her eyes, quite unexpectedly, as she faintly returned the smile, filled with tears.

"Hilda," he said, "you're a good sport."

She shook her head. She could not say anything.

"I'll tell you what," he said. This was later. "I'm not sure, when all's said and done, that you aren't pretty near right. It isn't going to do me any good to begin getting upset over one woman after another. And when a man begins getting excited over a woman he can't have, that's just what's likely to happen."

"Yes it is, Blink. I'll tell you"—she leaned forward, elbows on table, and looked straight at him—"I'll tell you, to think about love means that you are going to think more about love."

"Oh, of course," said he—"if you start something . . . Take the German army now—for years they've been doing nothing on earth but getting ready to fight. They're

thinking about it day and night. Well, one of these days they're going to fight."

"Of course," said she. "You see, Blink, if you were a high-strung young boy I couldn't talk to you like this. But you aren't. Nothing of the sort. I know you pretty well now, Blink—"

"Yes, I guess you do, Hilda."

"You mustn't marry an independent, highly specialized business woman like me, or an opera singer, or a Russian dancer. Pick a steady one, buy your little place on Long Island, and keep your bees and flowers. All I can add to that is—if it isn't to be Adele, find somebody like her if you can."

They left the restaurant soon after this, and walked slowly back to the hotel. Blink was silent, all the way, until they reached the open portal.

There he paused. Hilda stood quietly watching him, just as she had watched him for hours.

"Hilda," he said frankly, "you're right. My time has come. And I guess there's no good in putting it off."

"Not a bit, Blink," said she.

In this manner did Hilda Wilson and Blink Moran dispose of the riddle of the ages.

XXI

IN WHICH NEWS IS EXPECTED, AND COMES; BUT FROM AN UNEXPECTED QUARTER

BLINK went directly to his own room. Adele was sitting by the baby, sewing. And so Hilda, a very few moments later, finding on inquiry that Adele felt no inclination to go out, announced that she would take a long walk.

Her first thought was to go over to the American Express and inquire for mail. But by the time she had reached the corner she had changed her mind. The mail might bring problems. Her life was entering, this day, upon a new epoch. She must get as far as possible from problems and from people. So she walked over to the Boulevard Malesherbes, and through to the Champs Elysées by way of the Rue d'Anjou and the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré, turning off to the left finally at the President's Palace.

It was a sunny spring afternoon, and not cold. The great park-like avenue was alive with children and their nurses. She went over to the Punch and Judy show, near the Théâtre Marigny and stood for a time outside the enclosure, studying the delight of the children in the age-old antics of ugly little Mr. Punchinello. The little girls particularly held her eye and thoughts. She fell to wondering how it would seem to have—her mind hovered hesitatingly

over the phrase, and her pulse suddenly quickened its beat —to have her own little girl grown up to an enjoyment of outdoor play.

She walked on. The booths of the toy venders were doing a good deal of business. Children eyed the balls and hoops wistfully—so wistfully, in the case of one great-eyed child with black curls, that Hilda bought her a hoop and passed on with a glow in her heart.

She followed, without particularly intending it, the route she and Blink had traversed so often in their walks. They would be a pleasant memory, those walks. They would, at times, be a poignant memory; for they were a part of the one real companionship of her life.

She was right; it would be wrong to marry Blink. It simply wouldn't work. But he had been a wonderful companion. She would never forget his honesty, his simplicity, the magnetic attracting power of his strength and grace. And then, he had kissed her. For a long time her mind dwelt on that kiss.

She wished it hadn't happened. She did not blame him, but she wished it hadn't happened. It was not any the easier, this way, to put him out of her mind. Or to put the thought of love out of her mind. For she had been stirred. And now she was going to be lonelier than ever. . . . with youth and love and the natural joys of the senses put forever behind her. She was crossing a line—the great line. Soon, dreadfully soon, she would be close to the borders of middle age.

"Middle age!" . . . The prosaic time of life that precedes the last decline. One is "sensible" then, if ever. One is subdued. One is "steady." One works better, yes—and is easily casual in manner, and inclined to be careful about diet and about the proper clothing for winter. No more of

that wonderful eager questioning of life itself. No more risks; no more blind thrilling dashes at the game of life!

No more! . . . She was away out now on the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, walking more rapidly than was necessary. She slowed her pace. She must have passed the Arc de Triomphe without knowing it.

She turned off to the right by the taxi rank at the Porte Dauphine, and followed the line of the old fortifications through the narrow street that borders them on the inner side, between the high earthworks and the railway cut. Half-way through this passage she suddenly remembered that it was a reputed haunt of the *Apaches*. It was not an altogether safe place for a youngish woman to walk alone, even in the afternoon. For a moment the thought brought only recklessness. She seemed not to care greatly what might happen. There was not any too much to live for—just problems, and tangles of responsibilities, and endless, wearing work in a hostile world—in a rather ugly world. . . . But then pictures of the baby rose again in her mind, vivid pictures. There, now, was something to work for. There was an aim. She must take good care of herself for the baby's sake. She must rebuild her health—even, if the thing could be done, regain some part of the enthusiasm, the buoyancy, that had carried her thus far. The baby would help her to be young again—or younger.

She walked more rapidly; and was relieved, a few moments later, to find herself emerging quite safely on the familiar open *Place* within the Porte Maillot.

When she returned her room was empty. Adele was out. Evidently she was airing the baby in the new English perambulator Hilda had bought, at a price that had frightened Adele a little. It had not occurred to the little dancer that a baby carriage could cost so much.

Hilda found she was too restless to stay alone in the room; so she went out again, this time for her mail.

There was only one letter for her—from her mother. Margie, it appeared, had decided to announce her engagement; and all the disturbance, the wistful heartsickness, which the mother must conceal from the younger daughter, was discharged in this letter to the elder. But after a few moments, while she was walking back to the hotel, Hilda found herself rather welcoming the burden. It gave her something outside herself to dwell on. Then, too, she seemed to have a better understanding of her mother's sorrows; the gulf between them, the inevitable gulf between two generations, was certainly not so wide as formerly. She decided to give up the evening to writing a long helpful letter. For the first time it occurred to her that her mother, too, was, as she now phrased it, "stale on her job." And then and there she made up her mind to bring her mother East immediately after Margie's wedding and settle down to housekeeping with her. That would be good for both of them. And of course it would help with baby.

When she entered the hotel, Blink was in the manager's office, turning the pages of a thick little book that Hilda recognized for a railway guide. It gave her an odd flutter. But she might have known that Blink, once the decision was made and his course laid, would not hesitate. His time had come. He had said it.

He heard her, and glanced up. It seemed to her that he must surely have seen her as she moved by the door toward the stairs. She had a smile ready for him—perhaps not a radiation of good cheer, but still a smile.

But he lowered his eyes to the book.

Probably, she thought, it was just self-consciousness. A man is entitled to a little of that when he leaps precipitately toward matrimony. It seemed to her that he had reddened; but she could not be sure, moving by so rapidly.

The baby was back in her basket now. The door to the adjoining room was ajar, and beyond it Adele was moving about and humming a "rag" tune. She had a sweet little voice. A few moments later Blink came into her room from the hall, and Adele, with a glance in at Hilda and a mumbled pretext—something about not disturbing the baby—shut the door.

It brought a pang to Hilda. Curiously, it made her feel old, as well as painfully alone. But it was better so. When a man and a woman join hands and choose the single path, no others should be near. It is a very personal, an exclusive time. Friends will reappear later; in this occasion they can have no part.

The afternoon was nearly gone now. Hilda made herself physically comfortable in a negligee and began the letter to her mother, composing it with care. For it was to be a very important letter, marking the end of one great critical period of her life. Her mother must find support in it, and courage—the courage of a daughter who was young and strong and successful, quite able to provide a comfortable home, and to bring into it health and good cheer.

Just before dinner Adele, very self-conscious, came in for a moment.

Hilda said—"Don't stay in unless you want to, Adele. I shall not be going out again."

"Oh," replied the girl, "all right. Perhaps I will go then."

Nothing more was said. Their eyes did not meet. There

had been, of late, no reason why Adele should wish to go out. Neither dwelt on this fact. Thus, simply, tacitly, was the great change in their lives recognized and accepted.

Hilda ate alone in her room. Then she set the tray out in the hall, and drove herself back at her letter.

Adele was still out when Hilda gave the baby her ten o'clock bottle and went to bed. It was lonely, this room where so much had occurred to stir her feelings. She decided that it would be well to move right away. She would take a small apartment. Even if Adele should stay in with her for a little while—and surely some small time must elapse before the wedding—it would not be quite so bad. The surroundings, at least, would be new.

Yes, she would insist that Adele stay on. She would not be weak or sentimental now. It would do her good to shut away her own feelings—stop this interminable thinking about herself—and make the girl comfortable until the day of the great change.

She recalled that glimpse of Blink studying the railway guide. It would be like him to rush matters to a conclusion. Since his new plan implied giving Adele a home, he would permit neither her nor himself to drift a day longer than might be necessary. That was where Hilda herself could step in.

Yes, she would be good to Adele. The child had never known happiness. Now, at last that the great happiness was coming to her, she should experience the satisfaction, so deeply pleasing to a girl, of feeling that everything was being done "right."

After all, despite the wrench at her own tired heart, Hilda decided that it would even, in a way, be pleasing to herself to take a part in the fascinating preliminaries to a

wedding. The very fact of Adele's humility—the fact that she would expect nothing—would intensify the pleasure of giving.

She would deliberately make the girl, for once in her rather battered young life, the center of her small stage. She would help select the modest trousseau. It need not cost very much; and it would bring a light of heavenly happiness to Adele's eyes. She recalled her first impression of those "cow eyes," as she had seen them across a writing table at the American Express. Yes, it would be a pleasure to light them up. For a time she occupied herself in mentally going over Adele's scant wardrobe and checking off her needs.

She lay quietly in bed, the light out, the building across the street dimly visible through the open casement. She seemed to feel less depressed now. Her thoughts of Adele had operated to restore the sensation of Blink's steady friendship, that had come to mean so much in her life.

She dwelt on this. After all—despite her moments of weakness, despite his grotesquely matter-of-fact proposal of marriage, despite the one kiss—that had been the predominant quality in their relationship, friendship. A very fine friendship!

She felt again that she had taken the right course. To have permitted the stir of passion really to enter their relationship would have destroyed the friendship. This way, they still had it, would always have it. Yes, she would make Adele happy, for once. Blink would understand and appreciate it. There was even, now, a warm little glow at the thought. In this mood she drifted easily to sleep.

After breakfast, on the following morning, she heard Adele and Blink talking in the next room. Their voices

were low and guarded. Then Blink went back to his own room. Hilda could hear his familiar light step in the corridor, and then the opening of his door.

A little time passed before Adele tapped softly and opened the door. She had her coat and hat on.

She evidently had something on her mind to say, something that she found difficulty in saying. After a moment's hesitation she knelt by the basket and played with the baby's little hands. They were not thin hands now; there was a dimple at each knuckle.

"Hilda," Adele asked, still plainly gaining time, "don't we need milk?"

Hilda looked into the tin ice-box. "Yes," she replied, "we do."

"All right. I'll go around by the Rue des Mathurins and order it."

As she lifted the baby's small fist in her own left hand, Hilda saw a ring on her third finger, a very new ring, set with a single rather large diamond. It was a good stone, she thought. But, then, it would be. Blink would do it that way. She saw that Adele was smiling down with a new womanly softness at the morsel of life in the basket. She was glad that it was all working out so well.

"Hilda," said Adele then, suddenly serious. "Blink and I are going out to Auteuil to-day."

"Oh, are you?"

"Yes—to the hospital. I don't know if they'll let us see Juliette. If they won't, it's all right, of course. There isn't any hurry, with everything going so well here. But if she is strong enough, we'll—we'll talk with her."

For a moment Hilda's heart stood still. Quite unconsciously she had been coming more and more to take the success of her own new plans for granted. But now, thus

abruptly brought face to face with the issue, she was caught in an uprush of misgivings. She covered her confusion by saying in her most matter-of-fact voice—

"Well, I ought to know pretty soon, Adele, if I'm to plan things."

"Yes," Adele murmured, "I suppose that's so." She moved to the door. "I'll see you later in the day, Hilda. And we'll ask for your mail while we're out." Then she went into her own room, closing the door behind her. A moment later Hilda heard her outer door open and close.

Toward noon, Hilda began to watch for their return. She sat for a while by the open window, looking idly down into the street. Though it occurred to her, as the noon hours wore away, that they would lunch somewhere outside. Too, Auteuil might be some little distance from the city. She did not know just where it was.

The morning had been raw, but at noon the sun appeared. She continued in her room until about two o'clock. She made various efforts to read, but with no success. Her thoughts had followed Adele and Blink to that invalid girl in a hospital that until this day had been little more than a myth to her. It was now suddenly, painfully real. This Juliette, whom she had never seen and whom, for days at a time, she had all but forgotten, was now real, as well. It was as hard to write letters as to read books. Her mind would not come down to it. She was thinking, thinking—what if this faint remote shadow should close in about her now, all at once, darkening her life.

She faced this thought, not with the resentment that, a month or two later, would have blazed up in her spirit, but with a humble sort of dread. If Juliette should be better—if Juliette should be unable to see the wisdom of permitting her fatherless little girl to be reared in a good

home, with every advantage . . . try as she would, it was extremely difficult to face this contingency. She had known of it, of course; yet she realized now that she had been taking the opposite for granted—altogether too much for granted.

She dropped on the floor by the basket, and sat there for a long time, watching every motion of the baby; rearranging, with loving fingers, the coverings that the vigorous small legs would insist on kicking aside, responding to the wonderful little smiles with tears that came rushing into her eyes and made it hard for her to see.

She felt that this was an unwholesome indulgence, and at two o'clock took baby out for an airing. She had not been out a quarter of an hour before that deep, deep anxiety drove her back to the hotel. No, they had not returned. She felt strongly, as she wheeled the carriage off for the second time, that she must bring her nerves and thoughts under control. There must be no more "going to pieces." If she had any character, now was the time to show it. Deciding that she did have some character, she went resolutely away, and did not return until a little after four. Even then she did not hurry, but deliberately walked up the stairs with the baby in her arms.

Still they had not come back. At least they were not here. They might, of course, have come in and gone out again.

She laid the baby back in the basket, and made her comfortable, while putting a bottle to heat. Then she saw that 'Adele's door was open. It seemed to her that it had been closed. Yes, surely, Adele had shut it when she went away in the morning.

She looked in. A parcel had been dropped on the bed. And on the table stood a box of American chocolates,

opened and partly eaten. Hilda smiled faintly as she glanced at them.

She came back into her own room. As she went over to the wardrobe to hang up her coat, she saw a white envelope on the chair by the door. She had walked right by it when she came in. So Adele had been here, and had not waited to give her the news. That seemed a little—well, heedless. For she must have known how anxiously Hilda would be waiting. And Blink, too—he would think of that. Still, no news was, in a way, good news. That box of chocolates was surprisingly reassuring. They had been having a good time, a boy and girl sort of time. Even allowing for the thrill of their new relationship, even allowing for Adele's sudden, deep happiness, they surely would not have been staying away for hours, playing like children, nibbling chocolates, were they the bearers of bad news.

She hung up her coat; then moved over to the chair to pick up the letter. It was a long plain envelope, a "legal size" envelope.

Before her outstretched hand touched it, she wavered, bent closer, looked.

It was from Harris Doreyn, and was postmarked "London."

She picked it up, and turned it over and over in her hands. It was thick. Either he had written a long letter, or else there were enclosures. Hardly the latter, though, for he certainly had nothing of hers.

He was still in London, then. Or he had been, a short twenty-four hours earlier; the postmark bore the imprint, "April 1, 10 a. m." To-day was the second—Wednesday, the third.

He had been in London all this time, weeks and weeks.

Yet the last she had heard from him had been that brief note, written at Chicago in midwinter, announcing that he was coming to New York to see her.

She carried it over to the window. Strong as was her curiosity, she delayed opening it. She wondered what he had been doing in London all this time.

Then she wondered, suddenly confused, how he had found her address. Doubtless he had got it in New York as he passed through. Then he had known, all this time, where she was. He could have communicated with her. But he had not done so. He had always had the power to stir her to resentment—to unaccountable little resentments that flared up unexpectedly and laughed at logic. She was flaring up now; but not so strongly. Her life had deepened of late. Still, she was flaring up. She felt the color rushing into her face.

She deliberately dropped the still sealed letter on the bureau. It occurred to her that in her preoccupation of the morning she had actually forgotten the baby's bath. Though, for that matter, baby usually slept better at night if bathed near the end of the day instead of in the morning. She must not bathe her just yet, of course, so soon after the bottle; but she would get the bath ready, all but heating the water. She wanted to do something with her hands. She could not read that long letter—that letter from the one man who had brought love into her life—while this nervous flush was on her cheeks, while that confusion of queer little resentments was stirring within her. So she brought the light papier-mâché tub from the wardrobe and set it on its familiar chair. She got out the towels and soap. She filled the kettle from the water pitcher and set it over the alcohol lamp. Within the half-hour it would be all right to start the water heating.

There was nothing more she could do in this direction. So she went over and sat by the window and looked out. She decided that she would read the letter as soon as this absurd flutter of the nerves should have passed.

What she had told Blink was what she really felt; deep in her heart and in her reason. She was pretty sure of this. Even should Harris Doreyn come to her as a free man and ask her to become his wife, she would have to say no. For too much time had passed. Surely he had changed, almost as she had. As she had said to Blink, too much water had run under the bridge.

Yes, more and more strongly she felt, as she sat there—hands relaxed in her lap, deliberately inhaling deeply the crisp outside air, gazing apparently toward the building across the way, but really looking far, far into the past—that the time when she might have married successfully had long since gone by. It occurred to her that this was a selfish thought; it had to do only with her own success in life, her own happiness. Still, was it wrong to consider these things? Would it be sound, would it be honorable even, to bring to the man that loved one only a deep unrest, a great unhappiness?

She turned slowly in her chair and looked for a time at the very little person in the basket who had lately come to play so engrossing a part in her life. Baby was awake. She could see the little hands waving about. She could hear, now and then, a gentle gurgling and cooing.

Her eyes filled again. She got up and walked to Adele's door—stood irresolutely there, looking in at the box of chocolates on the table. Adele was a child—a nice child. She must try to make Adele happy.

But she wished—nervous and restless again—that Adele would come back. It was all right, of course. Such indi-

cations as there were pointed toward good news rather than bad. But it was a strain, waiting like this.

She raised her arm and looked at the watch on her wrist. It was getting on toward five o'clock. Why didn't they come?

She looked again at the watch. It was the one Blink had given her. She recalled, poignantly, the moment, there in the corridor just outside her door, when he had caught her arms and drawn her for an instant back against him—and how she had thought, in a flash of memory, of the moment when Harris Doreyn had caught her in the same way, passing from the dining car to the sleeper of the Chicago train.

What a tangle! What a blind tangle—no way out!

She felt it almost as a pain.

"Life is terrible," she thought.

She came back, and stood looking down at the letter. She thought then that she had better open it. Why, since she felt reasonably certain that it could not seriously affect her life now, should she hesitate in this way! One might almost think that she was afraid of it.

Then a warm curiosity surged within her; and the color returned to her cheeks. Why had he written that painfully brief note asking permission to see her in New York? Why, receiving no reply, had he gone on to London? And why, of all things, had he waited for weeks in London, apparently knowing her address, yet making no effort to see her?

It occurred to her, with a sharp wrench of feeling, that he might have been ill. Something might have happened.

She held the long envelope up to the light, shook it, and carefully tore off the end.

XXII

THE BABY'S BATH IS FIRST DELAYED, THEN INTERRUPTED FOR A MOMENT, BY EVENTS IN WHICH THAT SMALL PERSON FEELS NO IMMEDIATE INTEREST

THE letter was long. It explained much. It was indirect, even rambling, with here and there the homely observations and bits of a worker's philosophy that were characteristic of Doreyn. In the concluding paragraphs were sentences that for sheer tenderness and sweetness of spirit forced Hilda to look away and dry her eyes.

So much a hasty glance through the closely written pages told her. She could not begin really reading it until she had skimmed it.

It was an extraordinary letter—she could see that. There was much, much of the old Harris Doreyn in it. The familiar sense of the man so long out of her life, was settling again about her spirit as a comfortable old glove settles about the fingers. Even at the moment she realized this, and found the fact confusing. For surely she *had* changed; surely all that water *had* run under the bridge! . . . There were evidences here of the changes in him. They were not what she had foreseen, these touches of something very like humility—submissiveness, even. Though he had never been an aggressive man, in the familiar crude sense. He had advanced by tirelessly thinking out problems, by seeing far and arriving at accurate conclusions.

But now he was—well, older. Not negative in spirit, certainly not beaten, but older. In the old days he wrote more directly and crisply. And he had possessed a dry sort of humor; but there was not much humor here. She recalled his serious illness of a few years back. He had spent more than a year at Carlsbad. At one period the papers had spoken of him as dangerously ill; and a good deal had been said about his character and achievement. . . .

Again she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes; then settled back to begin at the beginning and read the letter through.

"Dear Hilda," it began. Then—

"Those two words look very cold, very formal. The impulse is strong in me to use the old, sweet phrases I used to use—you permitted me to use—all those years ago. But something holds me back. Of course, for one thing, you definitely took away from me, when we agreed to part, the right to use those phrases. And again on that dreadful night when we met on the train, and dined together, and I got off at that little town in Pennsylvania. Do you remember, Hilda? But of course you do. Those experiences are not so easily forgotten. I suppose—though my mind has always been unable to accept the fact—that your life has, in a sense, begun since then. Certainly you have built it up, and in what you have built I have no share. But you won't have forgotten that night."

Hilda lowered the letter to her lap, let her head rest against the chair-back and closed her eyes. Did she remember!

It was rushing back to her mind's eye—a clear-cut picture of him standing there on the station platform, gripping his suit-case and umbrella—a tall, almost gaunt figure. And it hurt; hurt with the old bitter sense of incompleteness, of unsatisfied hunger of soul and body, that was like

pain. . . . So he had not forgotten, either! But then, he wouldn't forget. She might have. It was rather strange that she had not, in the intense preoccupation of her life since then; for she was not big, not as he was. Come to think of it, she had always counted on his being bigger than she. She had known he would keep away, would let her have her life. And, excepting in her bitter moments, she had always been able to think of him as a strong successful man. She had always been able to feel that she had not hurt him in any way. He, by the solidity of his success, had let her feel that. He had even held his family together. She knew that from the occasional reports of his strong prominent wife. . . . She might easily have had that family on her conscience; but he had spared her such self-reproach. Every one about Harris Doreyn seemed to grow. Even Hilda herself, she thought now, was simpler and bigger for having known him, worked with him, in a pitifully incomplete fashion loved him.

She opened her eyes slowly, like one coming awake; compressed her lips; then read on:

"That note I wrote you from Chicago, Hilda—the note in which I asked if I might come to New York to see you—marked the final great change in my life. I did not wait any too long for an answer. After a week, I came on to New York. There—right at the railway station, just after my train got in—I called up the Hartman store and asked for you. They said you were abroad. They did not appear to know when you would return. I asked for your address, announcing myself simply as an old friend. They said that you would be either at London or Paris, and could be reached in care of the American Express. I caught a ship the next day. On the ocean there was time to think things over. I hardly knew myself, acting in this impetuous way after all the years of discipline. But I did know that I had to make one last effort to find you and talk with you.

"In London I went to the American Express and inquired for you, only to learn that you had not been there and had left them no forwarding address. That night I fell ill—one of the attacks that, I may as well confess, I have come to dread of recent years. I did have one long, very serious illness. This attack was a recurrence. You know, once our body chemistry takes to working wrong, it can be the perversest thing on earth. But after a few relatively comfortable years I had grown into a sort of overconfidence. I really thought I was well. Now I know better. It is plain that I was not strong enough to endure the burning eagerness that seized me at the moment I finally decided to look these old puzzling problems of my life in the face and act, for a change, and at last, honestly. During that week of waiting, in Chicago, then on the train, and in New York, and during that endless ocean trip, I was, I can see now, in a sort of fever of the spirit. It was not like me. It was more like an inexperienced boy. But the inexperienced boy can endure that sort of strain where the older man can not. It wore me out. I broke down, as one does, in my weakest spot. I am up and about now. I meet people, and talk business a little; but am not really myself. One thing I am glad of, on the whole. I am glad that I did not see you while I was in that state. For I can see now that it was an abnormal state. As it is now, in case I should chance to meet you—which is altogether unlikely in the few days that remain to me on this side—I think I could be rational.

"There is a confession I must make to you—and an explanation. There are moments—they came frequently during my illness, and were very disturbing—when I fear that I have acted wrongly. Toward you, I mean. There is, of course, a good deal of concentrated egotism in these intense, personal experiences.

"I hardly know how to begin telling you. It is such a very long story; and yet it can not be so very long in this letter. It is the story of my life during fourteen critical years. Though of course you know, if you will rouse

your memory, a good deal about the first three or four of those years. When we were working together, I mean, and for a time afterward. So my present story is concerned with the ten years since then. Probably, as it is so difficult to begin what must be said, I had better just plunge at it blindly, and trust that you still retain enough of your old understanding of me to interpret it.

"I can see now that it is not so uncommon a story. When we are young each of us thinks his sorrows great and peculiar above the sorrows of others. As we grow older, we learn better. Our suffering is pitifully like the sufferings of others. Every one who is capable of feeling is hiding a sorrow very much like your peculiar sorrow, or mine.

"Well—here is the story.

"After you had gone out of my life, I tried to forget you. I really did try. It was rather absurd, but I did. There were times when I nearly succeeded. Those were the times when the tide turned with me, and I was buoyed up by the excitement of success. But even in those days, some unexpected little sight or sound or vagrant thought was enough to set me afire again with the old feeling for you. Sometimes I have even gone so far as to think that it would have been better if we had had the courage to love honestly and completely—if we had gone ahead and broken the laws as they stand about us. I can say that now, at last; for the time has finally passed during which this might have occurred. I mean that then we might have completed our experience, accepted the final relationship with, at least, its release from the tremendous nervous strain of resisting our love, and, in some way, passed on to deal with life on the new terms. We might have been able to part, then, without these devastating after effects. We might even have worked through passion into friendship. This does happen, I think, now and then.

"But there, I suppose, speaks the man. As I read back over it, it is plain enough that I am thinking only of myself. Surely I am not sound there. Women and men approach these awful problems differently. And your instinct

in the matter was right. It must have been right. Besides, the man has the upper hand in these situations. The final burden of suffering always falls on the woman.

"No, when I think it over in this light I feel that I am all wrong, and not a little selfish. If I have grown since those days, it was surely through suffering. Hilda, this very trouble has more than likely contributed to your own growth. Success in which there is no suffering is a terribly hard thing, a brutal thing. It is hardly a matter of chance that the greatest finest figures in history are those who have suffered most.

"I have taken to reading a good deal of recent years. The slackening of my business anxieties—and then, of course, my illness—have brought me to it. And I have thought a good deal about these things. I have thought too about morality—the morality of my own city, actual and professed (two very different things) and of other places. My city in particular only because I know it better.

"I reread *The Scarlet Letter* this year. I saw it in a new light. It seems to me now, sometimes, that there is tremendous truth in the fact—seldom dwelt on that I know of—that the one triumphant figure in that book, shining out against the dour background of early hard New England and its unyielding conscience, is the sinner, Hester Prynne.

"Last year I reread the New Testament—or the four gospels. I had come to a point, far back, where I couldn't seem to find much real religion in the places where it is professed. It always seemed pretty unreal, and remote from life. But that is not true of the New Testament—up to the point where the hard-headed Paul steps in."

Hilda lowered the letter again, and for a time gazed out the window with eyes that did not see very much. This was indeed a new Doreyn.

"In fact there is downright religion in the philosophy of Christ, as we find it there. More religion, more charity and tolerance, more understanding of life, than its modern

expounders seem able to read out of it. It is a philosophy that I seem able to understand, getting it more or less at first hand, that way.

"But this isn't telling you my story, Hilda. And tell it I must.

"It is about my wife—Lillian. She and I have agreed to separate. It was never practicable before, with the girls growing up. But now they are both in college. And they are both of a pretty independent spirit, like their mother—and, I suppose, like me. It is sad, of course; and very perplexing. The rooting out of settled family habits is a painful process. Even in such a case as this, where Lillian and I have been out of sympathy ever since the first few years of our married life. She is a good woman, of strong character. And she is ambitious. Now her ambitions appear to be pretty well gratified. She has built a strong place for herself in that exceedingly small percentage of our social body that she regards as 'Society.' And she does a considerable amount of really useful work in certain clubs and organizations. There is no trouble between us—perhaps you will be glad to know that. This is merely the inevitable conclusion of our long drift apart. She would prefer to avoid a divorce in order to keep up appearances and protect her social fences. She is frank about that, and very practical.

"But I have to admit that I can't keep up appearances any longer. Ever since that wonderful and awful day when I admitted to you (and to myself) that you, by some ruthless miracle of nature—you, Hilda!—were the one women in the world who had the power to stir the deep recesses of my nature that had never been stirred before, to lift my senses and my thoughts into the extraordinary magic of love—ever since that day I have had to undergo the strain of living a double life of the spirit. I used to feel then that sooner or later I would break under this strain. And I have broken under it. The moment came when I could not endure it longer. God knows I have fought. For years and years I have tried to live for work and duty, with that baffled love, still magical, still miracu-

lous, flaming up unaccountably in my heart and in my thoughts. And so finally the day came when I told the truth. After all those years!

"We did not mention your name. We never have discussed you. But she knows. I am sure of that.

"And, too, she knows that we never sinned—technically. In telling her that there was and is another woman in my heart, I explained that much. And she, of course, believes me. But I am not proud of the fact. Technical virtue, of which so much is made in this world, is not altogether a pleasing thought to me now. There is usually cowardice in it, I think—and often a hard practical self-interest.

"That is my confession. That after all these years, I have, in my breakdown, again involved you, even though your name has not been spoken. I wish it could have been avoided. But perhaps you would forgive me for failing, as certainly I have failed, to carry the secret of our old love through to the grave, if you knew what an immense relief this new clean breast is to me. For fourteen years I kept the secret. For fourteen years I lived that inner double life. I felt myself a—well, a liar, in a hundred little silences and evasions and suppressions every day of my life during those years. And probably since I am not by nature an indirect or evasive man, but a frank one, the truth had to come out at last.

"Certainly, like you, I never sought that love. It burst upon us, on you and me. We did, I think, the best we could—we gave up our possible happiness, and each went on to face life alone. I do not know much of your side of the story since then, beyond the evident fact that you have been true to the character and ability I always felt in you and have made at least a material success of your life. Of course I am glad of that—very glad. I have been proud of you, am proud of you now.

"It may be that my attitude toward Lillian and the girls may seem—read in so fragmentary and incomplete a letter as this—to be cold and a little hard. I do not think it really is; but it may seem so.

"All I can say as to that is that during fourteen years—

during practically all of my most vigorous years, what might be called my prime—my strength has been devoted unquestioningly, entirely, to providing for them and equipping them to meet life. If my heart was elsewhere, at least my hand and my brain have been unreservedly theirs. What could not, in a victim of one of Nature's grim pranks, be a labor of love, I made a labor of duty. That appeared to be all I could do. If it was 'wrong,' if my present attitude is 'wrong,' at least it represents the best I have been able to do with my life.

"The story is not really so simple as that, of course. In many, many respects, I have probably proved a decent husband and father, even when most bewildered in my efforts to work out some sort of a philosophy of life. But what I have said seems to be about the net of it all, as I look back.

"And now, all this appears to bring me to what I really have to say.

"I am going back, Hilda. I sail Saturday, on the *Adriatic*. Perhaps, in case this letter reaches you in time, you will send me a word in care of the ship at Liverpool. Just some sort of human word, that would be like a handclasp between us, and a Godspeed from each to each.

"I am not returning in any frenzy of remorse and repentance. Not that, Hilda. I did rush over here in a mad fevered pursuit of you, no doubt about that; and have been a good deal humbled by this distressing physical breakdown and the chastening of spirit that it appears to have brought. It is simply that at last I realize that the time is past when I might have offered myself to you. Long past. While I may be up and about for years, my health is as good as gone. The physicians tell me that, and I know that they are right. The fever of love can not seize me again. I must be quiet. My new freedom will help there. It will be such a relief just to live frankly and honestly after all these years. It may even prove a relief to be alone, to think and read, and work a little, and find refreshment in new scenes and new friends.

"The curious fact is that this last mad effort to find you and offer my love appears to have been in itself something

of a climax to my years of suppression. It appears to have brought, now that it and its painful consequences are past, something in the nature of reaction. I had to make that great effort. I did make it. Now I feel that I can go back.

"It may be more difficult later. But that is the way I seem to feel now. And I am going.

"For now, just as formerly, it would not do for me to bring a wreck to you. It simply would not do. If we could be happy in each other, yes. But we could not be—not on those terms. I have had my mad moment, my mad dream; and there has been a sort of satisfaction in it. But it was mad, even though there was glory in it. And now that it is over I must go back.

"It helps me in this resolution to realize that you are still young—wonderfully young—are, in fact, hardly more than beginning the great campaign of life. While I am soon going to be an old man. It would be all wrong for me even to think of attempting to check your growth and progress by fastening my life on yours now.

"This is not a plea, Hilda. It is a statement of fact that I now perceive clearly enough. And you are not to think of me as an altogether unhappy man. There will be much in life for me. And perhaps, now that the long strain is broken, now that my breast is at last clean before the world, I may bring myself to become (what I have not been, God knows!) a friend to you. I have been through much. I have been battered about a good deal, and have observed a little, here and there. Perhaps, in your continued growth as a business woman, I may help, now and then.

"Not just now, but later on when I get my life somewhat reorganized. Anyway, if it is not too late, and if you feel that you can, send that line to the steamer, telling me that we are friends.

"And remember, Hilda, whatever you may have become, however your life may have changed, that there lives a man whose inner life has never swerved away from you. I do not altogether understand this set of experiences that we group so loosely and casually under the term 'love'; but whatever love is, it is the only word that we have to express

what I feel for you. I love you, Hilda. It is too late for some things—it is not too late to tell you that. This love has been the one little flame in my spirit that never has flickered out, even when life pressed hardest. It has been a stimulus, always. It has been my faith,—even, in a sense, my religion. I fought it down for years and years, only to find that at last it was to blaze up again and warm every remote cold corner of my heart. Once again—for the last time, I feel sure—it has driven me to break bounds. It has found its own climax in this desperate journey over seas.

"I can only welcome the whole experience, since it had to be. If it hurt, it has also helped. And in this strange climax it has once more stirred my feelings into a sort of triumph over the workaday routine of life.

"So I am going back now, to pick up the broken strands of life and weave such a new fabric as may be. The briefest word from you—at the steamer, on Saturday—will be all I need to complete this experience. Even that I must not expect too confidently. For God knows where you are and when this will reach you. But in any event, dear, think gently of me, and permit yourself to feel that my thoughts, my hopes—yes, my prayers—are with you.

"Good-by. And good luck to you!

"Harris Doreyn."

As she lowered the letter finally to her lap, a faint, pleasant cooing sound came from the basket behind her. She turned. The baby was awake. And there, on a chair, was the little papier-mâché bathtub, waiting. She had been a long time over the letter. She folded it now, replaced it in the long envelope, and laid it on the bureau. Then she lighted the alcohol lamp under the kettle, first looking to make sure that she had not neglected to fill it.

Slowly, this done, she closed the casement against the cool air of approaching evening, and undressed the baby, gazing soberly at the fat little legs as she threw the waiting blanket about them.

She was finding some difficulty in thinking clearly, or rather in feeling clearly. Mere thinking was hardly more difficult than usual. Her mind told her that, however disturbing the facts, Doreyn was right. It was wonderful that he could still feel so deeply; this big man, older and physically weaker, but still big in spirit. There was a sheer thrill in the thought. It warmed her, even while this sudden new consciousness of his suffering brought the tears rushing to her eyes. But her mind said that he was right. No matter how great the suffering, it was better this way. Their lives had grown too far apart. Too much water *had* run under the bridge. The difficulties were even greater than he could perceive. For he had been a mature man back there in those first days of their love, while she had been, in mind and feeling, a half-formed young woman. The changes in her since then had been immeasurably greater than any conceivable change in him. As it stood now, in the light of his letter, the whole sad experience of their best years, hers and his, was tinged with beauty. It was better that way. He was right. It was wonderful that he had been moved to straighten out his twisted life, after all those years of a great duty solidly performed, and had come all this way to find her and speak his love. But now he must go back.

So much for logic! But logic and mind were not all. From the deepest recesses of her emotional self came waves of feeling that confused and, at moments, alarmed her.

She poured the hot water into the tub, dropped in the bath thermometer, and slowly added cold water from the white tin pitcher that stood by the washstand.

Yes, he was right. He must go back alone. But it was wonderful that he had come. She would surely be a better

woman now, after this earnest of his faith. The thought brought a glow to her cheeks.

She worked briskly, with deft hands—throwing the blanket aside and lowering the little body into the water. With one hand she supported the baby's head and back; with the other she sponged the tender skin, gently but with vigor enough to bring a glow to the surface that outdid the color on her own cheeks.

The very little girl responded with faint experimental smiles and soft sounds. She had learned to enjoy her bath.

Hilda decided now that she would post her reply on this evening. That would be giving the letter more than time enough; but she would be sure it would reach him. And she would send it to the ship, as he requested; not to his hotel. There was a collection of mail at eleven every night from the box in the tobacconist's shop on the corner of the Rue Tronchet; between now and eleven there would be time enough to write a good letter.

She fell to thinking out this letter. He had bared his soul—she would bare hers. At least she would try. She must show her appreciation of his wonderful, lasting affection, while at the same time giving him a clear vision of the immense changes in herself. She would accept his offer of friendship, by giving him her own confidences at once. She would tell him all about the work, and something about her breakdown, as she was beginning to term it in her own thoughts. She had many times wished that he might know of her little successes. More than once, when urging some detail of business policy on a group of keen, hard-thinking men associates, she had wished that he might see how well she was handling the situation. And now there was within her a warm surging of healthy pride that she could,

at last, give him a glimpse of the mature, reasonably strong woman she had grown to be.

She decided to order up a light dinner as soon as the baby was bathed and fed; and then, before seven o'clock, set to work on the letter. She would slip out herself, later, and drop it in the box.

But then, when she appeared to be planning coolly enough, conscious of only a slight quickening of pulse, she recalled that difficult evening on the train. So it had lived poignantly in his memory, as well as in hers! . . . She felt again his arms about her, drawing her close back against him. She felt again his broken whispering close to her ear. She felt his kiss on her lips.

Then she found this memory vaguely entangled with the memory of other arms and another kiss—this last in a taxi-cab, skimming along the dusky Champs Elysées, late at night. She tried to thrust the thought of the later experience out of her consciousness. It lingered. She closed her eyes. She could almost literally feel that eager pressure on her lips. It was Doreyn—and then, momentarily, it was not.

The baby was in her lap now. She opened her eyes and continued, very gently, the drying process. Then she reached for the talcum powder.

She heard Adele's outer door open—and close. The connecting door was slightly ajar, as she had left it.

There was the sound of light footsteps in the next room. Then she heard whispering. It was Adele and Blink; that much was certain. She wished she could hear what they were saying. Her nerves were tightening. She felt a touch of the old pain at the back of her head that had been spared her of late.

She reached out for the little shirt of silk and wool and drew it deftly over the baby's head and arms.

Now she caught a few words.

"No, Blink"—this was Adele—"I think you had better let me do this. You wait here. Of course she has got to know."

"Of course she has got to know!"

Hilda's overtightened nerves suddenly relaxed. She sank back in her chair. The color swiftly left her face.

They were whispering again in the next room.

The baby whimpered.

Hilda collected her faculties with a strong effort, and, looking down, saw that the baby was cold. She wrapped the blanket about her, and, lifting her, held her close. With the motion, and the warmth, the baby quieted and in another moment was smiling again. Hilda, still very white, her lips compressed, her eyes dry and bright, pressed the soft little cheek tenderly against her own.

She heard Adele crossing the next room, coming toward the connecting door. She heard the other door open and close, and knew that Blink had gone out. Then Adele tapped, and entered. There were tears in the girl's eyes.

XXIII

IN WHICH HILDA EXHIBITS HER JUDGMENT AND CAPACITY; BUT FINDS IT DISTINCTLY EASIER TO ACT THAN TO THINK

ADELE came over and stood by the bureau, looking soberly down at the partly dressed baby.

Hilda went on with her task.

Finally Adele said, in what was meant for an offhand manner:

"I left a letter, Hilda. On the chair by the door."

"Thanks," said Hilda, "I found it."

Again they were silent. Hilda did not raise her eyes. She finished dressing the baby and laid her away in the basket. Then she walked to the window, opened the casement, and stepped out on the narrow balcony, leaning there for a little time, nervously tapping the iron railing with a tense finger. Her mind was up and alert now; her thoughts were racing.

Adele was, of course, the bearer of bad news—so bad that the girl was downright unequal to the task of delivering her message. Hilda decided to take the situation in her own hands. That, after all, was the best way to meet disasters.

Adele had sunk on a chair.

"I take it that you saw Juliette," said Hilda, kindly and briskly.

Adele nodded; then said:

"We had to go twice. When we were there earlier in the afternoon they told us to come back at five. We looked in here after the first trip, but you were out with the baby."

"Yes," remarked Hilda, "I wheeled her over to the Champs Elysées." Then, after a pause of only a moment, she added: "Tell me just what happened, Adele."

Adele's eyes overflowed now. She pressed her handkerchief to eyes and nose.

"You might as well let me have it, Adele," said Hilda, more gently. "I am ready for it, whatever it is."

Adele looked up. She seemed to be steadied by the strength of the woman before her. "Well, Hilda," she began, "we went in and sat with Juliette. Blink told her how wonderfully you have taken care of baby. And I told her, too. That made her very happy. But then Blink began asking her about her plans after she gets well, and how she'd feel about baby having a fine home and being brought up so—"

Adele broke down here; but not with a display of emotion—quite silently, in fact. She sat very still, looking straight at Hilda, her lips pressed together, the tears rolling unheeded down her cheeks.

"And she wouldn't consent," Hilda finished for her.

Adele did not reply at once, merely continued the silent struggle to control her emotions; then, after a few moments, continued: "I guess we've all come to see it too much in our own way, Hilda. It sounded all right to me, the way Blink was putting it, but as soon as she saw what he was driving at she got dreadfully stirred up. You know how quick and excitable these French girls are sometimes."

"Yes," said Hilda soothingly, "I know."

"Well, she got like that. Her nerves have been terribly

upset anyway, and I guess we didn't any of us realize what a shock it would be to her—the idea of giving up her baby. She was hysterical. The doctor had to come in, and one of the nurses. And she wouldn't be quiet until we, both of us, promised to help her and see that everything was fixed all right."

"How is it to be fixed?" asked Hilda.

Adele found difficulty in replying.

"She wants the baby right back, evidently," Hilda added.

Adele nodded. Her lips were compressed again, and the tears were falling. Suddenly she broke out:

"She's coming herself—in the morning . . ."

"To take baby away?"

Adele nodded again.

"But how can she? Is she well enough?"

"We don't think so, Blink and I. Blink talked it over with the doctor afterward, and he said he'd have to let her. It might give her a relapse, but she'd surely break down again now if she didn't do it. She's so worked up over it, you see. So Blink said he'd bring here in a taxi, and one of the nurses could come."

Hilda thought this over, deliberately.

"She'll take her into the hospital then?"

Adele nodded.

Hilda's eyes roved slowly about the room, taking account of stock. "We can put baby into the taxi easily enough," she mused, "basket and all. And there'll be room for all her clothes and things, I imagine. Maybe she won't need the ice-box and bathtub and those things at the hospital. Do you suppose Juliette has a room where we could send them?"

Adele's eyes were drying. She was staring at Hilda, in a rather bewildered fashion. "Are you going to do that,

Hilda?" she said now. "Send all these things you've bought?"

"Of course, child," said Hilda.

"Why, that's wonderful—"

"Nonsense! They're baby's things, not yours or mine. We don't want her to be less comfortable because we can't have her with us."

"No," said Adele, more slowly, "that's so, of course."

"I'm not sure," observed Hilda, "that I oughtn't to go right over there myself and reassure her. She must be in a dreadful state of nerves by now. And she'll have a bad night. Why, she must be thinking of me as a monster."

"It was sort o' hard to make her understand. But—"

"You see, Adele, while I don't know Juliette, I'll venture, from what you have told me, that she won't take any such care of baby as we have."

"I should say she wouldn't!" murmured Adele, ruefully.

"She'll be pretty irregular, won't she? Rather a temperamental business, take it all around."

"I guess it will be, Hilda."

"And doubtless she is quite ignorant—about this sort of thing, I mean."

"She doesn't know much about babies," said Adele.

Hilda mused on. "We've just got to do the best we can, I suppose. But it looks as if our job now is to make every provision we can for baby. I'll tell you what, Adele—try to have an English-speaking nurse come with her to-morrow. Will you? . . . Yes, that will help a little. I can show her how we make the food. You see, they could wreck her digestion in three days. And just think how we had to work to find the right food."

"I know," murmured Adele. "I know."

"How about Juliette? Is she hard to manage ordinarily?

Would she let you run in and out for a week or so, until she gets used to baby's ways?"

"I think she would," replied Adele.

"Well, that will help a little more."

Hilda stood, deep in thought, pressing a firm forefinger against her lips.

"No, I won't try to go to the hospital," she said. "But I really think you and Blink had better go back this evening. We want to do everything we can to reassure her and steady her. You can tell her that I will have everything ready when she comes, in the morning. . . . Let's see—this is Wednesday, isn't it. To-morrow will be Thursday." She said this last absently, as if talking to herself.

"Yes," said Adele, "to-morrow's Thursday. . . . We can go over, of course, to-night. You're awfully good about it, Hilda—thinking of Juliette that way."

"No," replied Hilda, thoughtfully, "I'm not good about it. I really don't believe I *am* thinking of her. I'm thinking of baby. We've got to steady Juliette all we can, for baby's sake. It will be bad enough, even with Juliette quite herself. For she will never follow our careful schedule. Never in the world!"

"I don't know," mused Adele. "She might. She'll be very devoted—I'm sure of that."

Hilda shrugged her shoulders.

When Adele had returned to her own room it occurred to Hilda that the newly engaged couple might feel that she ought to dine with them. In order to avoid this, she slipped quietly down-stairs, merely asking Adele, through the doorway, if she would keep an eye and an ear on the baby for a little while. Seated alone, in a corner of the small dining room, she ate sparingly of the table d'hôte dinner.

She was not hungry. The food almost repelled her. But she felt that she ought to eat something, if only to fit herself for the crisis into which she now found herself wholly drawn.

There was a sort of relief in the very intensity of this crisis. The time for action had come; and, as she knew, in action she was at her best. She would carry this little situation through now without any great difficulty. She would be quite calm—outwardly, at least. She would feel a deep pride in having everything ready in the morning, and in reassuring Juliette. If she had been guilty of an error of judgment, if she had permitted these deep feelings that had so stirred her of late to grow into a desire so intense that it had quite clouded her reason—well, now was the time for accepting the facts, falling back on her reason, and acting like the strong efficient woman she knew herself to be.

There were inner voices, of course, hinting shrewdly that the real shock of this experience would come later—after the baby had gone! When there was nothing to do.

What on earth *could* she do!

She wondered, quite coolly, at this ruthless will in her which had, years ago, conquered an all but overpowering emotional pull upon her and driven her away from the man she frankly loved; which had carried her, with that same hard drive, through her years of business success; which had made her dispose of Blink just when, and just because, she was dangerously fond of him! and which now was rescuing her from any weak desire to hold the baby close in her life.

There would be a shock. There would be bad moments, very bad moments. Not to-night, perhaps; but during the long nights to come, when there would be no helpless baby in a basket close by her bed, no baby to whimper for its bot-

tle, no baby to demand the hundred and one habitual little tender acts, each one of which had become a separate and strong pull upon the strings of her heart.

Her thoughts wandered to Blink. She wondered if she would have had the strength to give him up had she known that the baby was to be taken abruptly away . . . on the whole, she was inclined to answer this question in the affirmative. The temptation would have been greater; but the same difficulties would have been there. The reasons would have been the same. She wanted Blink now. She wanted something of her own, all her own; something human and tender. She wanted warmth. All her life she had been thrusting it away. It was not right—it was not fair. . . .

Sitting there alone, in the corner of the little dining room, she shrugged her shoulders; then looked up quickly to see if she had been observed. There were only a few persons in the room; and all were soberly busy over their food, as bourgeois folk everywhere are at meal time. The waiter was looking out the window into the dingy courtyard. She was quite alone, quite unobserved—alone as one can be alone only in a great, gay, busy city. She felt her eyes growing suddenly wet. She laid her napkin on the table, pushed back her chair, and walked deliberately out of the room and up the stairs. She held her head up rather stiffly. Her lips were pressed firmly together. And it seemed to her, mounting the stairs, in one of those swift excursions of thought that come when the nerves are tense and the pulse high, an interesting fact that all her faculties were—in the language of the store—on the job. Her head was clear, her will strong. She could think keenly and quickly. She had felt much of this sense of power on the day she straightened out Blink's life for him;

a little of it during her talk with Stanley Aitcheson, weeks and weeks ago, at the Café de la Paix. But on neither of these occasions had she been strong as she was strong to-night.

There was a thrill in the thought. It appeared to indicate that the old machine was gradually coming around into shape. At this rate she would soon be fit for work again, for real work. Nothing less, nothing else, indeed, she thought now, could save her from . . . she did not know what.

It seemed odd to her that the queer disturbing experiences she had been passing through should in some part do for her what a long vacation is supposed to do. There had not been in it much of what is usually regarded as rest. But she had already learned to sleep soundly. She had had to learn that, during the strain of the baby's illness. She had acquired the habit of sleeping when she could—deeply and gratefully. And her head had not ached nearly so much of late. In fact, the headache she had felt an hour earlier had come as a real surprise to her.

Adele was sitting by the baby, with her hat on. She said that there would be no chance of seeing Juliette again if they were to go late in the evening; so they had decided to leave at once, she and Blink, picking up a bite to eat on their way back. Anyway, she added, rising, they had lunched late and heartily. She glanced down at her slim figure, smoothing her coat over the hips. "If Blink doesn't stop making me eat so much," she said, "I'll be getting terribly fat."

Adele's outer door opened then, and closed softly. Hilda could hear Blink's light step crossing the next room. Near the door it stopped, as if he were hesitating. Doubtless he was coming in. Hilda felt a sudden little wave of sheer

feeling rushing over her thoughts. She held her breath an instant, then mentally braced herself.

He appeared in the doorway. She found herself looking again at the solid face with the perceptible twist in the nose, the strong bunches of muscle at the sides of the jaw, the shock of brown hair, the steady blue eyes. She saw again, too, the one curious eyelid, that she had once described to herself with the adjective "Gothic." During her weeks of close intimacy with him she had grown so accustomed to his appearance that this eyelid had ceased to be, in her eyes, a prominent detail in his appearance. But now she saw it again.

"Come in," she said.

The pleasant naturalness of her own voice surprised her. For another wave of emotion was sweeping over her. She was conscious, quite suddenly, of disturbing physical sensations. It came to her, as she sat there, smiling casually at the man who had so nearly swept her out of the logical course of her life, that these inner pressures might, at the slightest further encouragement, become insistent—overpowering, even. And, in a quick flash of memory, she recalled the little speech she had made to Blink himself—"To think about love means that you are going to think more about love." To which impromptu aphorism he had replied, in his blunt way, "Oh, of course—if you start something . . ."

He took command of the situation now quite in his old comfortable manner.

"We're going over there now, Hilda. I think you're right about its being the thing to do."

It was good of him to put aside his self-consciousness in this way. For all three of them, each after his own manner, had been distinctly self-conscious. Hilda knew

that there was a touch of fire on each of her cheeks at this moment.

He added, very simply and directly—"How are you feeling, Hilda?"

"Never better," said she promptly; if anything, a thought too promptly.

But he went on, as naturally as before—"That's good. I'm sorry things aren't going the way we thought. . . ."

"Oh," said Hilda, with an impatient little wave of her hand, "we can't help that!"

"No, we can't help it. Well"—he extended his hand—"I like the way you're taking it, Hilda. Though I knew you would be like this. I told Adele you would."

At which Adele nodded briskly, with shining eyes.

The situation was becoming more difficult.

Hilda took his hand, gripped it honestly.

"Thanks, Blink," she said. "And I haven't had the chance to wish you good luck before now."

Adele was moving toward the door. Blink's fist tightened about her hand.

"Thank you, Hilda," he replied. "And good luck to you! Good-by now. We'll see you later."

When they had gone, Hilda walked slowly to the window and looked out after them until they disappeared around the corner into the Rue Tronchet. Rather absently she let her right hand hang limp from the wrist and shook it a little. Now she came in under the light and looked at her hand. It was still white where his iron fist had compressed it. He had really hurt her. She almost wondered that no bones were broken. She moved the fingers, one by one; shook the hand again; then let it drop.

Her cheeks were still touched with fire. She had not minded the pain. Indeed she had welcomed it. The real-

ization of this fact now frightened her a little. She had never before felt quite like this.

She stood there, brooding, for some little time. Then, for a quarter-hour, the baby demanded her attention. After which it occurred to her that she had meant to write that letter to Harris Doreyn. On thinking it over, however, she decided to postpone this task until the morrow. She indulged in a little mental arithmetic. To-morrow would be Thursday—he was to sail on Saturday—Thursday to Saturday would be ample time in which to get a letter from Paris to Liverpool. Why, even if she were not to post the letter before Thursday evening, it would doubtless be at Liverpool before Friday noon, and of course there would be a Saturday mail before the ship sailed, as well.

Just to make certain that he should hear from her—and she must not fail in that!—she could send a telegram besides. Yes, she would do that. . . . All this, of course, in case she should not write the letter to-night. And an inner voice, speaking out of the confusion of feelings within her, told her that she was not going to write it to-night.

In that matter, the decision did not rest with her. There was much to do in getting all baby's things ready for the morning. She set about this task now, glad of the opportunity to work with her hands. The baby's clothes she packed in her own suit-case. She decided to give this to Juliette. The other things she made up in bundles, calling on the floor boy to bring her sheets of wrapping paper and twine. It was astonishing to find how many little possessions the baby had. The room was filled with them—they were in every bureau drawer, they rested on mantel, bureau and window-sill, they hung from the backs of chairs, from the steam radiator and towel rack, over the foot of the

bed; they lay on the shelves of the wardrobe. She gathered everything up, arranging the different kinds of articles in heaps on the bed and on chairs. Her eyes were dry; but the color was still high in her cheeks.

She was hardly more than started at this, it seemed, when Adele and Blink returned. Both wished to help; but she did not encourage them to stay, and they did not press. They brought good reports of Juliette. She had quieted down greatly, and already hailed the rich American lady as her dearest benefactor. So much for that. Adele and Blink had succeeded, at least, in their errand.

It occurred to her now that in her plans for the moving she had quite forgotten the perambulator. She recalled Adele's concern over the cost of it, and her lips twisted into a smile that quickly faded. She decided to have a boy wheel it over to the hospital in the morning.

Adele finally closed her door. Hilda was vaguely conscious that she and Blink were visiting in the next room until late.

Toward midnight Adele tapped at the door and looked in; but observing Hilda's preoccupation, merely said good night and went to bed. Hilda worked for a long time after that.

At about two o'clock, after carefully considering the problem of transporting a day's supply of food to the hospital, she decided to make it up the first thing in the morning with the new milk, and then insist on sending the tin ice-box along in the taxi. She could pack the bottles, in their wire frame, so that they would not shake about. If necessary she would make Blink carry the box on his knees.

Shortly after this she went to bed, thinking she was perhaps tired enough to sleep. But sleep did not come.

She got up after a time, took Doreyn's letter from the bureau, and read it all through again, standing under the dim night light.

Certain phrases, here and there, stood out. Those two or three flashing sentences about virtue, about what he so oddly termed "technical virtue," in particular. There was a touch of the old bitterness in these sentences, a distinct note of reproach—directed at herself. She skimmed the entire letter again before returning to these sentences. Taking it all together, it was not a bitter letter. There was sweetness in it, and much humility, and that sense of sobering age. She was inclined to believe that he had been unaware of the sting in those phrases when he wrote them. It was a lingering remnant of the old fire flashing out at her.

She went back to bed, and lay there, very still, thinking this over. She did not resent it. Rather, she was interested—or the cool thinking part of herself was interested—in his evident deep feeling on this difficult subject. She was glad that he still had that deep feeling, and she wondered if he was right about it. Had there not been, after all, a good deal of cowardice in her heart when she so desperately ran away from him? And something of that "hard practical self-interest"?

He had given, in those few strikingly unorthodox sentences, a strong new direction to her thinking. More and more, as the early morning hours wore along, she felt the suffering that he had gone through because of her—the years upon years of suffering. More and more she was catching the significance in his extraordinary pursuit of her. Through all his successes he had never forgotten her. He had not even resented her. He had merely lived for his duty until what he so oddly called "that inner double life"

became a heavier burden than even his strong spirit could carry further. And then he had tried to find her. But first he had told his wife the truth.

She did not speculate now on the puzzling moral problems involved. The fact that in those dark days of their love neither had had any other solution than the one they had followed, now bore no emphasis in her thoughts. She was thinking of him as a broken ill man. She constructed mental pictures of him there in London, during these last few weeks, seriously ill and quite alone. It seemed to her that she should have been there, nursing him, bringing into his life some late touches of the happiness her cowardice and selfishness had denied him. She wondered if he was very gray now.

To this extreme of self-reproach had her unleashed emotions brought her. From various angles she viewed herself, and what she saw led her thoughts always to those words of his—cowardice and self-interest—hard practical self-interest.

She asked herself if any words ever coined could more accurately explain Hilda Wilson—the rather beautiful, admittedly successful Hilda Wilson. Here she was, at thirty-two, a woman who had always taken and never given, a woman who had produced nothing excepting a sufficient income to insure her own comfort, whose mind had been on an inhuman sort of self-advancement in the world of men.

So strong was this mood that the few inner protests that rose were swept instantly aside. It was nothing that she had helped in her mother's support and in the education of the children. She could afford it. And at that, her pride alone, her sensitiveness to unpleasant criticism, would easily account for these efforts.

A new thought slipped in now—perhaps the most painful of all. She had resented the constant watchful suspicion of the business world as directed toward an attractive single woman like herself. What, now, if the business world were instinctively right! Certainly her attractiveness was a factor in her success. Had she not employed it, all the time, subtly and indirectly, to advance herself? And had she not always, with the utmost adroitness, saved herself from any sort of payment in kind? Was she a better woman, in any remotest sense, merely because she was smart enough to advance herself without payment? . . . After all, with all their shortcomings, the men she knew of her own age were married, were producing children, and were working to provide for the families they had brought into the world. While Hilda Wilson was producing nothing! She had even tried to take for her own a child that had not come into the world through the wearying travail of her own body and soul—and this for a selfish gratification, because she had become conscious of a great unsatisfied want within herself. And because she was, she had been, altogether too selfish to pay the price of marriage. She had come to prize her independence too highly for that.

That was it, she told herself—she had always taken and never given.

There was something about men, and about married women, that she had never understood. There was something in their experience of life that was not in her experience. In some baffling sense she found herself outside of life—of actual, ordinary human life. . . . She wondered, with a momentary swelling of bitterness, if these searching, disturbing experiences of hers here in Paris had not been designed by some grim superbeing as a mockery,

a taunt, to her, as a heartbreaking illumination of her pitifully empty life. She had almost known love; she had almost known a sort of motherhood. In each instance she had been wilful. In each she had now completely, as she phrased it, "lost out." Nothing was left but a sad letter from a man whose life—whose love life, at least—she had wrecked. Even now, because of her—her "hard practical self-interest"—he was turning away from the family he had reared to face life and, perhaps, death—alone. It was even too late to help him.

She told herself that she was nearly well again. She would return home soon, and resume her work. That, at least, remained to her. . . . But then her heart sank. In the one stronghold of life, her work, they had wrecked her good name. Or she herself, through her own wilfulness, had wrecked it.

She tried to tell herself, now, that she would step in there, head high, and face them all. But her heart was not in this thought. She would need courage, supreme faith in herself, in order to make any such fight as that.

There were moments, a little later, when she even thought wildly of recalling Blink into her life. Blink, in his genuine, not over-enlightened way, had loved her. She would take him back. She would give herself to him. She would resolutely throw behind her the old selfish life. She would make a home for him. She would devote herself to him in a penitential orgy of self-sacrifice. She would stop taking, stop it forever. She would give, give, give! She would bear children for him!

At this thought rose the fluttering question that had arisen once or twice before—Was she too old to bear children?

All this brought its own reaction, of course. It was

painful to realize that even in her moment of greatest desire to sacrifice herself she was really planning only to gratify herself by sacrificing Adele. More than which, her saner self knew well enough that her settled habits were the strongest part of what she had built, and that these were not to be overthrown in a moment, with the help of nothing better than a petulant outburst.

No, she had been really sound in giving Blink up. In a way, that was the saddest aspect of it. She had refused him, at the last, as the result of a quick instinctive decision. It *had* been instinctive. She couldn't conceivably have married him. It was a job for which she was distinctly not fitted. She couldn't have made good at it.

So her thoughts raced until the first faint rose-pink of dawn touched the windows across the street.

She tried to pray then, gropingly.

XXIV

HILDA COMES TO A BRIDGE, AND CROSSES IT

SHORTLY after ten o'clock in the morning they brought Juliette—Blink and a nurse. Hilda received them, calmly.

It gave her a start to find that Juliette was beautiful—pitifully thin, very white, but beautiful—this girl and woman who was so curiously a rival, who possessed rights in the smiling dimpled morsel of life in the dainty basket. She was a little thing, nervous, eager, swift and light of movement. Illness could not hide her grace. Her skin was soft and fine as the baby's own. Her eyes, now a thought sunken, were big, brown, and deep with burning questions of life.

She had no English; but she smiled a little, with drooping eyes, when Hilda took her hand and led her to the basket.

Here she sank to her knees. The tears came suddenly. She lifted the baby, coverings and all, and cuddled it close, swaying from side to side and crooning soft messages into the nearest rosy ear.

Blink glanced inquiringly at Hilda, then slipped into Adele's room. But Hilda called him back.

"She doesn't look very strong, Blink," said Hilda. "We had better carry it right through now. There is no good in waiting. Ask her if she wants to hold baby herself, or move her in the basket."

Blink put the question in French.

Juliette looked up, smiling suddenly through wild tears, and answered brokenly.

Blink, very serious, shook his head and spoke again.

She came to her feet at this, with a light spring. She was extraordinarily graceful. She sprang back, still smiling, actually a twinkle in her eyes; then shook her head, protesting volubly.

Blink turned to Hilda, saying only—

"She says she will carry the baby herself." He looked about the room.

Hilda had piled all the parcels on and about her suit-case, by the door. Blink's eyes rested on them.

"Is that all to go?" he asked.

"Yes," said Hilda. "You can get it into the taxi, can't you?"

"Oh, surely," replied Blink.

They were most matter-of-fact, these two. But then, Hilda reflected, they had never really been anything else. At that, it was best.

Blink pressed the bell. When the boy responded, he set him at work carrying the packages down. Even the heavy scales were there.

"Tell Juliette that I want her to keep the suit-case," said Hilda.

Blink translated.

Juliette's face flushed pure radiance at the tall beautiful woman, who stood so quietly there by the foot of the bed. She talked a musical torrent.

"And please explain that I will send the perambulator over before noon," Hilda added. She felt curiously unreal, as if the little scene were being enacted on a stage before her; and she was struggling with inner hostility that would

not down. It was not in the contract that Juliette—the hitherto mythical mother—should prove to be a vivid personality of uncontrite and unconquerable charm. . . . How utterly French she was! . . .

The little personality nearly broke down again, at this last. She glided across to Hilda, and, still holding the baby, reached up and across to place an impulsive kiss on her cheek. And she said quick ardent things.

There was no escaping it. The girl had to have her little scene. Hilda's own eyes were filling now. She bit her lip.

The packages were gone; and the suit-case. Blink, very sober indeed, came to Juliette's side and took her arm. The nurse stepped in from the corridor, and insisted, with authority, on carrying the baby herself. Another moment, and they were gone.

They left the door open. Hilda walked slowly over and closed it.

She came to the window then and watched them enter the taxi. Her parcels were packed in close about the chauffeur. The hall boy, his liberal tip in his pocket, was already getting the perambulator out to the street.

Then the taxi rolled away. They were gone indeed.

Hilda turned and looked about the room. It was amazingly empty. And it was not very clean—not attractive.

The tears were coming. She bit her lip again, and fought them back.

She came slowly into the center of the room, and stood there, trying to think. She pressed her hands to her temples.

It was no use. She could not stand it. . . . She went to the wardrobe and took down her hat and coat. She hurried out, and went over to the boulevards.

She thought she would walk slowly and make an effort

to interest herself in the picturesque variety of boulevard life. But she could not walk slowly. And nothing she saw interested her. It was an unreal Paris, this, that surged about her on the sidewalk, that glittered and glistened in the shop windows, that cluttered insanely the shelves and hoardings of the newspaper kiosks, that rushed and rattled to and fro on the broad pavement beyond the curb. It was an empty Paris, a shoddy Paris, a worse than meretricious Paris.

Because she had no consecutive thoughts and no destination, she walked around the Grand Hotel and over to the American Express.

There was no mail for her.

She went to the newspaper table and found a New York paper. She might as well pick up the broken strands of her old life. For now she would have plenty of time. But her mind seemed incapable of following her eyes along the printed page.

She found a chair in an unoccupied corner by one of the long windows. Here she made one more effort to read the paper, only to give it up. For a little time she sat quietly observing the groups of her fellow citizens that came and went through the doorway at the top of the curving double staircase.

These were unreal, like Paris.

She decided on a walk. There was one occupation that would do some good whether she enjoyed it or not.

Accordingly she went out, crossed the busy street, repassed the Grand Hotel, and entered the Rue de la Paix. This street had played a considerable part in her life of recent years. She thought of this now, as she moved swiftly and steadily along, and pursed her lips at the thought.

She crossed the Place Vendome and went on through the

Rue Castiglione to the Rue de Rivoli. Here she walked still more rapidly. She had quite forgotten that this route was taking her past the Hotel Continental, where she was likely to be recognized.

She entered the Garden of the Tuileries, and walked about the paths for a time. Off to the east, beyond trees that were budding out with the first faint pale green of early spring, she could see the towers of the Louvre. She walked toward them. Not since her first visit to Paris, as an enthusiastic young woman, had she entered that building. She decided to go in now. Perhaps something there—a painting or a statue—would interest her, occupy her mind. So she made her way into the great building, and drove herself to walk persistently through a mile or more of its passages and halls. She found the *Venus de Milo,* and studied it for a time. She followed the crowd to the famous *La Gioconda* of Leonardo, the *Mona Lisa* which had but recently been returned after its strange disappearance from the Louvre.

But the Louvre, like all Paris, was empty and unreal.

She lunched late, at a crowded bakery on the Rue de Rivoli. Toward three o'clock she turned reluctantly toward the Hotel de l'Amerique. She must go back. She could not walk the streets indefinitely. For one thing she was very tired. She had had no sleep. And the strain had been great. . . . She dreaded returning to that empty room. She dreaded, too, encountering Adele and Blink. Her head was throbbing. She felt that she could not talk to any one. Yet, she certainly could not avoid returning. All her own things were there. Perhaps she could slip in without being observed, and lie down for an hour or two. Surely sleep would come now. There must be some natural end to the strain of this continued wakefulness. . . .

Perhaps Adele and Blink would be out. Perhaps she was borrowing trouble. Surely there was no good in crossing bridges before you came to them.

Not that she hadn't come to a bridge! . . .

She slipped into the room fairly on tiptoe.

But Adele's door was ajar. Adele was in there, humming a French song, a love song.

She came at once to the door.

"Oh, Hilda," she exclaimed, "where on earth have you been?"

Hilda made some sort of reply—she hardly knew what.

"I've been waiting to tell you about things. And Blink stayed as long as he could. He only went a little while ago. And he's coming back to take us to dinner."

"Oh, thank you, child," said Hilda, at this. "I couldn't eat a mouthful." And she added, "I've only just had my lunch."

Adele's face fell. "Oh, but you must, Hilda! Blink and I are counting on having you with us."

Hilda thought rapidly. They were simple, these two, and kind. They were thinking only of her. And she, quite as usual, was thinking only of herself. She managed a faint smile.

"All right, Adele," she said now. "I will go with you, anyway. Probably I can nibble enough to be sociable."

"Blink says to make you take a nap, Hilda."

"Just what I was about to do," replied Hilda, laying away her hat in the wardrobe and taking off her coat.

She slipped into a negligee and lay down, resisting an impulse to close the door. To her great relief, Adele herself closed it.

Still sleep did not come. Hilda's wide eyes studied the bare red walls, and the ceiling. It had an ornamental

plaster border, that ceiling, and in the center, above the chandelier, a plaster-white rose garden. She studied these.

After a while she got up and read Doreyn's letter, standing by the window. She lay on the bed and read parts of it again.

She realized, suddenly, that this was Thursday—very nearly Thursday evening—and she had not yet written her reply.

She got up again, drew a chair to the table, and started framing a letter in pencil.

She wished her head would stop throbbing; it was so confusing.

It was plain enough, as she sat vacantly there, pressing the pencil against her lips, that she had no plan, she did not even know what she wanted to say. Her color was rising. She wrote random sentences and paragraphs, tearing up each as soon as it was written. She was dimly conscious of the cause of this difficulty. After a time, when she had definitely given up trying to write, she found herself thinking more clearly. At last she reached out for the little railway guide, the "Mignon," that was never far from her hand. And turning the pages with quick firm fingers, she looked up the Calais trains.

She heard Blink return.

When Adele tapped Hilda was dressed for dinner.

She opened the door and smiled her steadiest. Then she wished she had made a rather less assertive appearance; for the two were a thought bewildered by the sudden change in her. She could see that.

They walked over to the Lucas. Hilda, who was very simple and natural now, led the way to the corner that she and Blink, so recently and yet so long, long ago, had regarded as their very own.

The two were still ill at ease. Adele seemed unable to think of anything to say. And more than once Hilda felt Blink's eyes studying her. But finally she managed to bring a smile to Adele's sober face. And it was she herself who suggested a theater. She insisted that they should come as her guests. They called for newspapers, and a note of eagerness crept into their talk as Adele, rather shyly pleaded for the new kinemacolor pictures. She had never seen them.

Hilda called for a taxi then, and took them to the Kinemacolor Theater in the Rue Edouard VII.

After the performance she carried through, over Blink's protests, a little supper at the Café Riche. The principal dancer there knew Adele, and persuaded her to do a maxixe with him. Simply dressed as she was, girlish and natural in appearance, her performance appealed to the sophisticated audience as a novelty. The applause they gave her brought a deep blush to her cheeks as she rather shyly resumed her seat at Blink's side and slipped her hand into his.

It was a successful evening, on the whole—a very successful evening.

Adele slept late the next morning. Hilda did not waken her.

At ten-thirty, however, Hilda, in traveling suit and hat, her wardrobe trunk closed and locked, her satchel, umbrella and wrist-bag lying ready on the bed, stood looking at the connecting door. She was considering knocking, when she heard Adele stirring about. Then she did knock.

Adele's sleep-flushed face appeared in the doorway.

"I didn't want to wake you, child," said Hilda, with a friendly smile. "But I really haven't another minute."

"Why—why," stammered Adele, rubbing her eyes—"You're not going off—like this—"

"Yes, like this," said Hilda, brightly. "I haven't seen Blink, Adele. If I should miss him altogether, give him my good-by, won't you? And all sorts of good wishes for you both."

Then before the girl could reply, Hilda reached out to her, drew her close and kissed her. "I want you to be happy, Adele," she said.

"But—but—" Adele rubbed her eyes again—"Where are you going?"

"I am going," said Hilda, quietly, "to London."

XXV

HOW A MAN AND A WOMAN MEET AFTER MANY YEARS, AND MANAGE TO TALK ONLY OF TRUNKS AND TAXIS AND CHICKEN AND SALAD

THE Calais train was crowded. Hilda secured a seat by the window, only to discover a moment later that she was in a smoking compartment. However, as there had appeared to be no unoccupied seats in any of the non-smoking compartments, she decided to remain.

Opposite her sat a Frenchwoman with a small baby in her arms. On her own side were two young Englishmen; opposite these, two middle-aged Frenchmen who conversed volubly and dramatically throughout the journey. All four men smoked intermittently. Fortunately the day was mild, and none of the smokers objected when Hilda let the window down a little way at the top.

The Frenchwoman appeared to have no English; but smiled gratefully when Hilda, at intervals, insisted on taking the baby.

Hilda held the little one as close to the window as she could, keeping it well wrapped against the draft. It appeared not to occur to any of the men so much as to ask if their smoke was an annoyance. At any rate, they did not ask. And Hilda fell to speculating, as had so long been her habit, about men. . . .

And while her outer self was thus engaged, her inner

mind was dwelling quite practically on the telegram she felt should be sent to Doreyn. Here it was, Friday. His ship was to sail from Liverpool on the Saturday afternoon. It was barely possible that he might go up to Liverpool a day ahead. While the wording of the telegram was plainly going to prove rather a difficult little problem, certainly, since she was making this journey for the express purpose of seeing him, she must let him know.

She framed the message in many different ways. It was quite impossible to tell him what was in her heart, of course—in a telegram. And it would not do to ask him to cancel his passage. That was a decision that he must make for himself. At the great moment of her life, when her mind and heart were at last, after the hard years, bent on giving without question, bent on giving everything, she must not begin to ask. She must be prepared for any sacrifice, even for the final sacrifice of losing the opportunity to give. She must not in any way insure herself. She felt this. And so she came down to the simplest of statements—"Arrive London seven this evening." But then it occurred to her that he might altogether miss the intense personal feeling that lay behind the words. Certainly she must not let him think that she merely happened to be reaching London in the course of a business journey. Finally the message worked out as follows:

"Letter received. Arrive London seven this evening. Will go direct to your hotel. Hilda."

She sent it from Calais. And then insisted on carrying the French baby to the boat and making it comfortable.

That was a curiously disturbing moment, when she actually wrote the message down on the telegraph form. The last few words, that condensed blunt sentence, were so

hard to write that she hesitated over them. They were quite crisp and casual. She had written phrases not unlike this one a thousand times in business messages. But now she knew, with a tightening of the nerves and a quick rush of color to her cheeks, that she was deliberately closing the door on what had been, until now, her very life . . . When she did finally write those thirteen words, however, it was with a firm hand. And she gave the paper, with a half louis, to the telegraph clerk, and quite calmly counted off the change into her wrist-bag.

There was to be no turning back now—no more cowardice, no more "hard practical self-interest." The problems ahead had an overwhelming look . . . no matter, she would do her best to meet them just as they might come. If they should, at the last, overwhelm her—why, that was the chance that one must take in life. She was going straight on.

The Dover-London train rolled into Victoria station through a dusky spring rain. Usually London depressed Hilda, after Paris; but she was not depressed now. The young Frenchwoman and her baby were still on her hands; more so than in the earlier stages of the journey, now that the English tongue assailed their ears at every turn. The woman managed to convey to Hilda, after much talk and many signs, that she would be met at the station. They laughed a good deal, these two young women, over their struggles to exchange ideas with only the baldest beginnings of a common language . . . Hilda, her pulse quick, her temples throbbing, was glad of the diversion.

She had not thought that Doreyn would meet the train. Indeed, she had purposely refrained from telling whether she would be coming in at Victoria or Charing Cross; forgetting that such information is not hard to get.

She saw him now just as she was delivering her charges to the husband and father who had been eagerly searching the crowded platform for them.

Doreyn *was* grayer. That was her first thought. But not so much older. She glanced again at him through the crowd. He had always been thin, and had always stooped a little. As she remembered him, the stoop had been more pronounced.

He was looking about through the crowd, looking for her. He moved a little forward—it seemed to her that his step was light. On second thought, she was not at all sure that he did look older. Indeed, he was disconcertingly like the Harris Doreyn of earlier years.

Pictures rose swiftly before her mind's eye. She saw him as she had seen him last, on that station platform in Pennsylvania. Perhaps it had been the sorrow on his face on that vivid occasion, the deep sense of defeat, that had made her think of him as an oldish man. And then his letter had revived and strengthened that impression. She suddenly recalled now that there had been, as well, sweetness and a bigger, better, philosophy of life in the letter, and evidences of vigorous, independent thinking.

She was quite bewildered. She knew that her color was rising, her pulse high. It had been her plan to change her costume at the hotel before seeing him, if she could. She was now wearing her old serge suit—the suit she had worn on that memorable evening when Blink had first taken her to Luna Park and then to Lavenue's; and over it her coat of gray homespun, waterproofed. On her head was a simple little hat; on her feet the low, "common-sense" shoes in which she preferred to travel. . . . For an instant she indulged the rather wild notion of evading him, and letting him find her later at the hotel. He, now,

was distinctly better dressed than in the old days. She had forgotten that men no longer bow before the advancing years; that they dance, work, play golf; that age is going out. He was, indeed, with his long well-cut overcoat, his soft hat with a rather wide brim, his walking stick, a man of distinguished appearance, a man who would attract notice anywhere and would be treated with respect.

He wore a mustache now, close-cropped, iron-gray. She wondered if she liked it; and decided that she did.

The crowd opened. He was standing still, taller than any of the men about him. Now he was looking toward her. He glanced away, then back, and hesitated an instant, as if in doubt. She waved her hand and smiled; then turned to bid her fellow traveler farewell.

When she turned again he was almost at her side. They clasped hands with something the manner of casual acquaintances.

"I didn't expect you here," she said, smiling again.

"There was a chance of missing you, of course," said he, "but I decided to take it."

He seemed to her quite composed in manner. It was oddly difficult to reconcile this experienced, skilful outer man of affairs, with the great-hearted person of frank, deep, almost boyish feeling that his letter had disclosed.

"You have luggage, Hilda?"

"Oh, yes." She remembered now the impatient porter behind her.

"Let me have your keys, Hilda, and I'll get your things through the customs. Nothing to declare, I suppose."

"No—nothing." She found the keys in her wrist-bag, and gave them to him; then slowly followed him as he went with the porter into the fenced-off section of the platform.

It was going to be hard to say very much. She thought about this, standing there, pursing her lips and watching the swift work of the customs officers. She wished she had driven herself to write that letter, as he had written his. For now that they were face to face, there were barriers. There was an outer worldly personality about him, built up through the years for the express purpose of hiding and protecting the really human man within. And there was the same sort of crust about herself, of course. Yes, it was going to be difficult, and in ways that she had not foreseen. If only she *had* written him, honestly and fully! Still, come to think of it, she couldn't have done that, for until within the short span of a day and a night her feelings had been changing and developing with a rapidity that was—well, violent. It was not more than twenty-four hours since she had begun definitely to learn what her feelings were. But if only it had been possible to write him, the ice would have been partly broken by now. And she thought, with a rueful half-smile—"There is so much ice to be broken, so many cold years!"

Locomotives were panting in the great dim train shed. Porters with laden trucks dodged through the slowly dwindling crowd. Close by the customs enclosure, in the roadway that runs through the station, the taxicabs in a long and impatient line, rattled and snorted.

They stood by one of the taxis. Hilda's trunk and bags were packed in beside the driver. The porter had opened the door for them and now stood waiting.

Hilda felt that Doreyn was hesitating. For herself, she was silent. Already the situation had far outrun her capacity for thinking. She was not weakening, she would go on, but she could not think or plan.

"You'll want to go right to the hotel and make changes," said he in a low voice, after that curiously long moment.

She had never in the past felt this clumsiness in him. She was glad that he had written of the confusing fires that had burned with such glowing unreason in his heart; it helped her now partially to understand him. And she was thinking, as she watched his momentary helplessness—"It is because he cares!" There was a thrill in the thought. And, too, she was glad that he showed so obvious an unfamiliarity with the requirements of a situation that was essentially furtive. He, like herself, had always resented that side of their relationship; the managing of it had always been hateful to him. As he had written, he was a frank man, not an evasive one.

Not until he spoke again did she realize that she had not replied.

"You see, Hilda . . . You're going to have dinner with me, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes, Harris!"

"Well then, suppose I send you along now, and wait in the hotel lounge for you."

Her eyes wandered up to his face, and down again.

"Aren't you coming?" she asked, very low.

"I'll take another taxi," said he, offhand.

She knew that he was glancing at the too visible luggage. Resentment—that old resentment—was stirring deeply within her. He was thinking only of her, of course. But here again, and this time at the great moment, she found herself confronted by the old furtive thoughts. They were in his mind, and now in hers.

She compressed her lips. Her eyes moistened, quite suddenly. She stiffened herself, and drew in a long breath.

The porter stood patiently there at the door. Less patiently the chauffeur fingered the wheel. In the eyes of each was deference, but behind it the shrewdness of utter sophistication.

The confusion of the great station was all about them, roaring in their ears.

She thought again of his letter, and of that phrase of his about cowardice. Suddenly she could see the page, the very look of the words in his handwriting: "cowardice—and a hard practical self-interest."

He had sacrificed everything—he had cleaned his breast—before coming to her. Even then he had been ready to give her up. He had asked nothing. It was she who had voluntarily come to him.

And now he was trying to shield her. That, she reflected, half bitterly, was natural enough. She had been the kind that insisted on being shielded—always she had been that kind. And he could not possibly know how deeply she had changed.

She glanced down at the old serge suit, and at the tip of a toe that appeared beneath the skirt. She felt travel-stained, and—well, clumsy.

"Listen, Harris," she said—and oddly matter-of-fact her voice sounded to her own ears—"I don't need to go to the hotel now. Can't we just leave the baggage somewhere and go on to a restaurant?"

The quick relief that came to his face brought a sudden warm glow to her heart. She stepped into the cab.

He spoke to the chauffeur, placed a half crown in the waiting hand of the porter, and followed. The door slammed. He was sitting there beside her, his arm brushing against hers.

The taxi whirled out of the station, out on glistening wet pavements.

She made several mental efforts to frame the question that was in her mind. Finally, still matter-of-fact, she said:

"Where did you tell him to go, Harris?"

"To the hotel. I will have the hall porter lift the luggage off. We needn't get out."

He did not add, "No one will see us." But he might as well have added it.

However, she merely replied, "That is what I was going to suggest."

They rode through Victoria Street, Parliament Square, and Whitehall, Trafalgar Square and the Strand. It was extraordinarily difficult to talk. Hilda looked out at the buildings that slid past—great stores, a corner of Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, the government buildings, the Nelson monument and the lions in Trafalgar Square; then the dingy crowded Strand. Everything appeared more than normally vivid. Little street scenes impressed her . . . A man had been hurt in an accident—there was the inevitable curious crowd and the inevitable dominant policeman; a remarkably impressive policeman, even for London. She looked after the motor buses, with their cacophony of advertising signs. Fleeting impressions, yet all engraving themselves deep in her memory as they flitted past. Even at the moment, sitting quietly there so close to the man whose personality had, after all, dominated her life, she knew that she would never forget this ride.

The window was down a little way on her side of the cab, and a few drops of rain came in. He observed this, and asked if she would not like him to close the window.

"No," she said. "I like it."

There were a few other such desultory remarks. Nothing personal was said. And the silences were deep.

The taxi turned into the courtyard of the great hotel, and came to a stop. A huge green-and-gold person appeared. Hilda leaned forward, suddenly all business.

"Take my luggage," said she crisply, "and please see that a room and bath are reserved for me on the Embankment side. I will be back later." And she dropped her card and a coin into his hand.

The green-and-gold person touched his hat and closed the door. Already others had pounced upon the luggage.

She turned to Doreyn. "Where are we going, Harris?"

"A quiet place, Hilda—"

"Yes, where we can talk."

He gave the chauffeur the name of a French restaurant in Soho. And they were off.

It occurred to her that he might think there was more of the old cowardice in this quick desire for "a quiet place" . . . Cowardice! She compressed her lips. After all, her taste on this evening was not for crowds and noise and glitter. Nor was his. And then, of course, she was not dressed. She had merely expressed an honest wish. As for the rest of it—well, doubtless he would have to find her out. It is the man's business to find the woman out . . . She wished she could ask if he was, after all, sailing on the morrow.

It was a pleasant little restaurant, with red walls and white woodwork. There were candles on the tables, with red shades.

When they were seated, he went straight at the menu. He was grave; and courteous—a little distant. It was his self-consciousness, of course.

Hilda rested her chin on her hands, and watched him. She was smiling a little, a mask of a smile.

He looked up. He had put on his eyeglasses. She was glad to see that he still wore the old-fashioned sort, with small lenses; the sight of them carried her back, brought up little scenes from their past, hers and his.

"Harris," she cried softly, "you have hardly changed at all!"

He smiled at this.

"If anything, you seem younger to me," she added.

"You are a little older, Hilda."

"Perhaps that is it."

She was still keeping up that faint mask of a smile; perhaps because, for sudden, puzzling little reasons, the tears were close to her eyes. She was thinking—swiftly, defiantly—of the years, the events, the tangle of dreams and work and confused emotions that struggled there between them where the table ought to be. *Had* too much water run under the bridge? . . .

He said—"You will have to help me order, Hilda. I don't know just how your tastes run now."

"Oh—not very much," said she—"a light dinner, Harris. Let me see—what have they?"

She studied the menu. It provided occupation, for the moment.

"Oysters?" he suggested.

She slowly shook her head. "A little clear soup, Harris —chicken, and a green vegetable, or salad. Perhaps a light dessert. I don't care. I'm really not hungry—had a fairly heavy lunch on the train."

He gave the order; then hesitated, and looked inquiringly across at her . . . "A little wine, Hilda?"

She shook her head, quite suddenly, with compressed lips.

"That suits me just as well," said he. He laid the card aside, and clasped his hands on the table.

"Harris," she said, abruptly. "Are you sure you ought to be out this way?"

"Out what way, Hilda?"

"Knocking around—in the rain?"

"Oh, that!" said he. "I'm all right, Hilda. As a matter of fact I have been getting well so fast that I have been a little ashamed of my letter. The human frame will stand a lot, it seems." Then he changed the subject. "You get over here—Paris and London—pretty regularly, I suppose, Hilda."

"Twice a year, Harris."

"Are you spending much time here, this trip? In London, I mean."

This was the question. A few words from her, a simple straightforward answer, and the ice would be broken forever. She sat very still, fighting back the color that she felt rushing to her cheeks. Fortunately he was not looking; he was studying his clasped hands.

She could not give him that simple answer. She felt herself dodging back, downright running away.

"I don't often have much time here." . . . She could not look at him.

"Most of your work is on the continent, I suppose."

She inclined her head. Then, wilfully, she changed the subject, recalling one or two office episodes that had once amused them, and asking after old associates. But all the time, in a mental undertone, she was thinking—"He was right. I *am* a coward! Just a coward!" And she

suddenly recalled and applied to her own case a judgment she had once heard him utter regarding a certain fair-weather department head who had not remained long with the company—"I'm just about good enough to make a showing until something happens!"

With the soup she found herself approaching the vital topic from another angle. "You—you're sailing to-morrow?"

He hesitated. And in one of those flashes that came to her now and again, she had a swift look into his mind. He was thinking of her, again and always. He would not be put in the position of taking her for granted.

"Why—no, I'm not, Hilda." He spoke quietly enough; but she knew that he, like herself, could not raise his eyes. "You see, you said nothing in your message about sailing, and so I figured that you would be here a few days. And of course, Hilda—now that you are actually here—I want to see what little of you I can. You will be busy, of course."

"You canceled your passage, then?"

"Yes. Just before they closed, this afternoon. You will be busy, Hilda. I shan't expect to see much of you. But—"

"I shall not be busy, Harris." Her voice buried itself in her throat.

XXVI

HILDA AT LAST FEELS THAT SHE IS HERSELF; PLIGHTS HER WORD; AND FALLS ASLEEP WITH SOBERING THOUGHTS

HE PAUSED, not quite hearing, then went on: "—but I'll admit, Hilda, I am hoping for a few chances to talk. You see"—he was smiling now —"we've got so many threads to pick up. We really shouldn't expect to do it all in a minute. I don't know what we—no good talking gloom!—but it may be a good while before we have any such chance to get acquainted. I didn't succeed in writing the things I wanted to say, of course."

Quite suddenly she looked up. "That was a wonderful letter, Harris!" she said, very softly.

He waved this remark off. For a moment he looked at her; then his gaze wandered to a neighboring table, to the red candle shade at his elbow, to a point on the wall not far from her shoulder. He studied this last point with some intentness. It was an old odd trick of his, when he was thinking, this of apparently fixing his attention on near-by objects. It left her high and dry, outside any possible current of talk. And it stirred a thousand half-lost memories of their years together in the old office.

When he looked that way, the thing to do, she knew, was to wait. Accordingly she waited.

Finally he turned—smiling again, more like himself; smiling with the old odd blend of shrewdness and good humor. Yet it was not wholly the same; she felt a deeper gentleness.

"Has it occurred to you, Hilda," he said, "that we are a pair of children, you and I?"

The simplicity of this remark brought the tears suddenly close. She had to smile as she nodded. "I know, Harris. We are. There are so many things to say—and I can't say them. I can't, Harris!" She leaned forward on the table, and spoke, by way of self-contradiction, in a sudden earnest flow of words. "You must be patient with me, Harris. Please! You see, you have written it out—some of it—and I couldn't write it. And I have come straight to find you—"

"I didn't want you to come, Hilda."

"—and now I can't manage to say anything but foolish little remarks about trunks and taxis and chicken and salad. It is—it's absurd! I am *not* hard, Harris—not as I was. I have feelings—but they are all locked up inside me. Please be patient with me, Harris! If any one on earth has the key, it is you."

Her face was scarlet. He was saying again—"But I didn't want you to come, Hilda."

"Harris, you did!" she cried.

"Yes, of course. But I tried to make that plain in my letter—"

"I understood your letter, Harris. I was only afraid of coming too late—"

"You don't mean that you dropped everything and came just for—"

"There was nothing to drop, Harris." She was very sober now; that deep flush spoke more of sheer nervous ex-

citement than of confusion. She added, "I was afraid you would be going up to Liverpool to-day."

"I did consider that."

"And if you had, I would have followed you."

"But your work, child!"

"I am not working now. I will tell you all about that—later, some day when we are talking. I have so much to tell you, Harris! I have been taking a vacation. And strange things have happened to me. I have been shaken, Harris. I was so afraid you wouldn't be here—that after all you have been through I might fail to find you . . ."

He sat very still. He had let his hand drop on the table, and was fingering a spoon. She glanced down now at that hand. She could have reached out and touched it with hardly an effort.

"Harris!" she broke out, on a sudden warm impulse. "I can't quite believe it. You *haven't* changed!"

He seemed literally not to hear her. When he did speak it was to say, very slowly:

"You know, Hilda, I meant just what I said in my letter. I have come to feel that it is best for me to go back and try to work it out alone. It has been a moving experience, this journey. And my illness after it was a warning. I have been shaken, too—"

"Oh, Harris," she breathed, looking full at him with great glistening eyes, "it was wonderful! Do you think I don't see that for myself? . . . Oh, I'm not big, Harris; not as you are. I know well enough what I have done. I fought you. Yes, I did! I fought your influence in my life—"

"But, Hilda—"

"I was a coward. I was hard. You said it, Harris—'hard practical self-interest'—"

"But Hilda, it was an instinct. You were right—I was wrong. What else could you have done? There we were —my family—"

"I don't know what we could have done, Harris. Right now I don't seem to care. Perhaps we had to part. Yes, probably we did. My instinct, as you say, may have been sound enough. *That* wasn't my real offense. Harris, I fought you. I hardened myself against you. I brought fresh interests into my life for the very purpose of crowding you out of it. I tried to forget. During those first busy years I almost did forget."

"Hilda, do you mean . . . Hilda, if I were free, do you mean that you would . . . it is hard to say . . ."

"Don't say 'if I were free', Harris!"

"But I am not free yet, Hilda."

"Has *that* anything to do with the way I feel, Harris? Outside of injuring others? I couldn't do that, of course —not wilfully. But it seems that I *have* done that. I did just that and then refused to help, tore my life away from yours. I was cowardly—hard—practical—"

"Please, Hilda!" She caught the look of pain in his face, and her intensity slackened, softened. "I must tell you now," he was going on, "I have had a pretty bad time over that letter of mine—since I sent it. It was doubtless a natural enough thing to do, at the time, the way I felt. But after it had gone I realized that from beginning to end it was a demand."

"It wasn't, Harris!"

"And some of the old bitterness was there. Hilda, I am not really bitter. I would really be happier—now—in a way—knowing that you are going on to complete your life in freedom. But in giving you up, for once and all, I couldn't bear to let you go without telling how much

more, how much finer, than a gust of passion my feeling for you has proved itself to be."

"Oh—Harris! . . ."

"And I wanted you to know, that I tried first to conquer it, and then, when that failed, to live worthily of it. No, I don't think I am really bitter. I'll admit I've been surprised to find how deep some of those old resentments lie." He spoke more quietly now; and looked up at her. "I have regretted those phrases enough, Hilda. I do know better, really."

"No," said she, "surely you don't. That phrase"—she saw him wince as she repeated it—"'hard practical self-interest,' was an arrow of truth, Harris. It struck home. Even if you didn't consciously think it, it had rankled there deep in your feelings all these years simply because it was true. I really think it had to be said—once. My air needed clearing. That cleared it . . . You see, you have always been giving—to your family, to the business, to—to me. And you have had to take chances, run risks, fight big hard fights. In all the relations of your life you have been the responsible one, the one that carried the burdens. While I have been a salaried person—taking, always taking. You have given your life, I have been bent on taking mine. I have lost out—"

"How about me, Hilda? You could hardly say that I have won."

"Yes, Harris, you have. If one ever wins! You have been growing simpler, and finer, and gentler—oh, don't try to tell me you haven't! I have eyes. You are big, Harris—a big man! While I—"

The tears were coming. She stopped, with shut lips. Then she felt him smiling, an incredulous smile—whimsical, too.

"Hilda," he said, "we *are* a pair of children—arguing hotly about the unarguable. Let us try to be reasonable."

"I'm afraid I can't—not right now."

"Let's try." He was still smiling. "As a matter of fact, we're both stirred pretty deeply. The difficulty with such a situation as this is that neither of us can hope to realize —now, to-night—how deeply we *are* stirred. It doesn't happen every day. It doesn't happen once in the average lifetime. For years I have had to fight down day-dreams of this moment—this moment, Hilda!—when you would come to me like this. It has, at times, been more exciting than I could bear—just thinking about it. And now, all at once, here it is!" She loved his smile. It *was* gentler; and distinctly more quizzical, more whimsical, than in the old days. "I am perfectly aware, Hilda, that I can't think rationally to-night. I am not sensible."

The corners of her own mouth were twitching now. Just as he was sobering.

His hand still lay there on the table. She reached out, with a curious hesitation. Her pulse was racing. Her hand brushed softly against his, then timidly, caressingly, closed about it.

She felt his fingers tighten about her own. Vaguely, with little the appearance of actuality, she saw the waiter turn discreetly away. She looked after him because she could not look at Doreyn.

After a little she heard him say:

"Let's go on with our dinner, Hilda, like the sensible folks we aren't." And in a lower tone, he added—"It is wonderful!"

The ice was broken now—the last of it. And with that simple clasping of hands had passed something of the

nervous intensity that had so stirred them. With the salad, and the dessert, they found themselves drifting into a quietly companionable atmosphere, into a sense of closer friendship than any they had known in their former association.

Hilda even found herself asking about the business—the great Doreyn Company of to-day. He gave her odd interesting bits of information, with glimpses of the three or four hard fights that had led up to the final establishing of the company as a solid concern.

"I haven't been very active of recent years," he added. "Not since my long illness—the year I spent at Carlsbad."

"Was it hard to let go, Harris?"

"Yes, at first. But still, I wanted to. The real difficulty, of course, was in getting myself out of the clutches of the business."

"Of course," said she. "That would have been. I don't see how you ever managed it—with such complexities."

"Those things can generally be managed, Hilda. It took a few years, of course. And I might not be free of it yet if I hadn't cut the last knots out of downright impatience, just before I started on this journey."

While they talked on, each telling the other whatever drifted into his mind, Hilda found her nerves steadying a little. Finally, when a glance at her wrist watch told her that it was close on eleven o'clock, she said, suddenly very practical, "Harris, I think I'll take you back now."

"Take me back?"

"Yes. It is wonderful to find you so well. But we're both tired. And I have a notion, anyway, that you are fooling me some about your health."

He thought this over; and a shadow crossed his face.

"I'm afraid we have been rather careless, Hilda. We could"—he hesitated—"we could just as well have left your things at another hotel. I must have lost my wits."

"Please, Harris—don't!"

"But, Hilda—this is a very wonderful moment—but do you think I am going to permit your whole future to be jeopardized. Even if we—later—"

"Do you think I care, Harris!"

"Child! You must care!"

"Harris!" she leaned forward. Her gray-blue eyes were big and honest, her voice low and none too steady. "All those things have been said—everything that could be said about me has been said—and none of it is true. Not one word of it. Now I want to be real for once. Just real. I'm sick of cowardice—"

"Yes, Hilda, bless your heart. But—"

"Tell me, Harris, could it hurt *you?*"

"Oh, no, dear! Heavens, no! But—"

She motioned him silent.

"Harris," she said, "please pay the check and let us go."

The waiter brought his long coat, that looked so well on him, and her old homespun coat.

Doreyn stepped forward, took her coat from the man, and held it for her. As it settled about her shoulders she felt his hands rest there for a brief moment.

They waited at the door for a taxi. He stepped in after her. The door slammed shut, and the car moved off down the dimly lighted street.

His hand brushed against hers. Slowly their fingers intertwined.

The car turned out of the Soho district and into Leicester Square. Out there in the wide street, away from the lights of the music-halls and the shop fronts, it was

dark. She felt him suddenly sit up straight and draw in a sharp breath.

"What is it, Harris?" she whispered.

He withdrew his hand, slipped his arm about her shoulders, drew her head close—then, gazing down into her upturned face for a brief moment, bent nearer.

Her lips met his, very gently. And the years that had been between them fell softly away.

They came in through the gorgeous hall of the great hotel, their faces flushed, their eyes in a daze. She paused finally, and extended her hand to say good night; not out of a plan, rather because it seemed, in a vague way, the next thing. He took her hand. They even said good night—or so it seemed to her.

Then she heard him saying:

"Hilda—we can't part like this . . . here, let's sit down!"

He was leading the way to a divan, in an inconspicuous corner of the lounge. She sank down beside him. And on the instant, she could not have said how, her hand had found a nestling place in his, hidden between them, close to her side and his.

She sat very still, looking straight before her across the great room. A few groups of men and women sat talking, and sipping liqueurs, and smoking. Nobody minded them. Nobody cared.

Doreyn's thoughtful eyes were on her. He could see, and feel, the new unsmiling softness about her mouth. She was so blankly sober! The deeps within her were stirred. She was a big woman now—he felt that. Big and fine in the humility and sweetness that were so new to her, and so wonderful! And she had come to him . . . after the years . . .

"I'm thinking, Harris—"

"Yes, child?"

"We can't sit here like this."

"I know."

"Probably we ought to say good night."

"We will, Hilda. But give me just a few moments more of you. I'm trying to believe it."

Her fingers tightened a little about his. "Don't you believe it, dear?"

"In a way, of course. And then again I seem not to. It has been so long, Hilda—so very long!"

"Yes, it has been long. Do you think—it has been—too long, Harris?"

He slowly shook his head, with compressed lips. "How could it be too long, child!"

She was still looking out, straight ahead, thinking of dark water running swiftly under a bridge—water that could never flow under that bridge again, but had lost itself in the sea, and been drawn in a changed form to the clouds, and drifted off to fall again, God knew where!

"I'm not the same, Harris. I'm different—harder. Yes, I am!" For he was smiling at this. "Selfish. One does form habits. You can't smile those habits away, I'm afraid, Harris."

"You are a better woman than the girl I loved, Hilda. Life has deepened you."

"Oh, if I could only believe that!" she breathed, low.

"That is how I feel you, dear."

He could see her thinking about this, groping to find herself in this new bewilderment. Then she shook off the mood—without, he thought, altogether arriving at a clear mind.

"Perhaps we ought to say good night, Harris?"

"I'm not the same, Harris. I'm different"

"We are going to, child, in a moment. We're as much at sea as ever. We haven't planned."

"We'll plan to breakfast together. Perhaps one or the other of us will have recovered a little sense by that time."

"Perhaps, dear. I hope so. But I seem to have let everything slip. Just as I had worked out all the reasons why I must give you up—good reasons, too. I'm a little ashamed, Hilda. It was all because I kissed you."

"The kiss was yours for the taking, Harris."

"But I have meant so differently. It was treason."

She whispered, very softly, "It was love."

"Yes, Hilda, no doubt about that. It was love. And it was a man's life. But I have got to let you go. I should have been stronger."

"I won't go, Harris."

"Oh . . . Hilda."

"You need me, Harris. I am through living for myself. Perhaps it is too late—but my life is yours."

"How can I take it, Hilda?"

"How can you help taking it? How can either of us help it? Do you really think that words can stop us now? You crossed the ocean to find me. I crossed"—her eyes lighted, with a sober, self-reproachful sort of humor—"I crossed the channel to find you. Here we are!"

He was struck by this. He slowly nodded. "Yes—here we are!" He was turning new thoughts over and over in his mind. "Are you sure, Hilda? Perfectly sure?"

She gave him one swift glance, smiled a little, and pressed his hand close against her side.

They were silent for a space. Then he said, moodily:

"This is just about overpowering, Hilda."

"I know."

"And it seems somehow wrong."

"How wrong?"

"Why, child—we are plunging straight toward the one thing I have come to think unfair, impossible."

That faint smile again touched her eyes and lips. "Toward what, Harris?"

"Toward"—he found some real difficulty in saying it—"toward a life together—marriage."

Her fingers were tight about his. And she was nodding gently, but not smiling. "Yes, Harris, a life together, such as may be left to us. I have stolen precious years from your life—"

"Don't say that, child! The facts were solidly against us. You are forgetting."

"No, I am not forgetting. At least you might have felt me there—helping, and waiting."

"Impossible, Hilda! You were right."

"I was wrong, Harris. No use, I can't see it any other way. Wrong in my spirit, I mean. I fought you—fought the one man that loved me more than his life." Her eyes were filling. "I never was worthy of your friendship, even, let alone love! And I had your love—and trampled on it—and fought you!"

"You are quite unreasonable, child. You had a moral sense—that was natural. It was sound. I don't even now see quite what we are to do. Can you wait for me, Hilda—perhaps a year? Is it fair?"

"Of course I can wait, Harris. Please never ask me that again! . . . I'm going to *make* you go now."

He released her hand, and sat up, thinking. Finally he smiled. "Well, Hilda, as you said—Here we are! We'll talk it over in the morning. We've got to separate, for the present."

She gave a little shrug.

"I'm going to take good care of you, girl. So that, years from now, you will be able to look back on this year with no regrets."

"I shan't have any regrets." She knit her brows. "Tell me, Harris, *are* you as well as you look, and seem?"

He nodded.

"I shall worry about you. What if you should be ill, and I not there. Harris, I want to take care of you."

"I shan't be ill, child!"

"If you were, would you call me?"

"Hilda, child, you must not forget that this is a big city hotel, where we are both known, you and I. You couldn't come to my room like that."

"I don't seem to care, Harris."

"You must care, dear. Or I must for you."

She pursed her lips; and for a moment studied his face. She turned and swiftly surveyed the room. No one was observing them. Nobody cared.

She reached out and laid her hand on his temple; pressed it there a moment; then let it slide down his cheek.

Their eyes met, and lingered. There was magic in her touch. Each felt it. Each saw it in the other's eyes.

He got up, then. And she after him. He took her right hand in his left. And they glanced about the nearly empty room like guiltily happy children.

Their eyes met again. The same magic held them, eye to eye.

She drew in a quick breath, then turned away. "I want to kiss you again, Harris."

"I know, Hilda . . . But we can't. You must go. Quick—please!"

"Yes. Good night, dear."

"Good night, child."

And she left him standing there.

At the door she paused and looked back. He had not moved. He looked very distinguished—standing hat and stick in hand, his overcoat on his arm. She was thinking, in a flash, how absurd it was for him to talk about his age. He was only a little more than fifty—in his prime—in midflight of a splendid career—a career colored so curiously by his love for herself! She decided then, on the instant, that he must not withdraw from active life. Since he was not old, he must not *be* old. They would build, he and she, build a new rich life.

He pressed his fingers to his lips. She did the same.

Then she hurried up to her room. She knew well enough that there would be no sleep for her; certainly not for a time. She busied herself unpacking her handbags. She opened her trunk, and spread the fan-like cluster of clothes hangers, smoothing the wrinkles out of suits and gowns. Then, slipping out of her clothes and into nightgown and negligee, she sat for a long time on the edge of the bed, braiding her hair and trying to think. It had never been so difficult to think. Her being was aflame with a wild new joy.

And there were queer little cold reactions. She fell to speculating about love, wondering what the word meant. Curiously enough—and she even, herself, thought of it as curious—during these moments of reaction the magic seemed to leave her. In one of these moments it occurred to her that she could not say she "loved" this man. The only thing she was sure of, the only positive thing, was that she was going straight on. That hard driving power of will that had carried her away from him during the years now had reversed its direction and was resistlessly

moving her toward him . . . Not that she regretted the fact; she merely wondered at it, with a sense of over-nervous alertness of mind and feelings, yet with detachment of a sort. Certainly she was going on. And it was equally certain that she had meant all she had said to him, all she had implied, even. It was what she had come to London to say . . . She recalled another phrase from his letter, "this set of experiences that we group so loosely and casually under the term 'love.'" Doubtless that was it—a bewildering, compelling "set of experiences," such as she was passing through. She was suddenly glad that he, too, had felt these confusions. It gave them common ground.

She was trying to see him with her mind's eye. It was tantalizingly difficult. She found herself, instead of clearly picturing him as he had appeared in that last moment when she looked back from the door, remembering episodes of their office days, and little ways of his—tricks of speech, poses of his fine head, the motions of his rather long hands. She could visualize the back of his head better than his face; he had what she had always thought of as a "gentleman's head," in the line from the temple past the ears, and in the modeling behind the ears.

And then for a time, after she had put out the lights, raised the windows high for air, and crept into bed, she lay very quietly, looking up into the darkness and brooding on herself. The new situation was going to make unusual demands of her. Would she prove equal to them? "I'm like a bachelor," she thought, "who is called upon to give up, all at once, his hundreds of little selfish personal habits. I'm terribly independent about little things. For that matter, I am exactly that—a bachelor woman. And those little things, some of them, are going to be harder than the big things. It is the difficulty of remembering, of

thinking in time, about matters that seem too small, almost, to think about at all. I wonder if it is in me to be kind—as kind as he deserves."

It was, after all, just a problem. All her life she had been wrestling with problems. Most of them she had solved with some success. All she could do, was to try to be equal to this one.

Yes, it was just one more job—a very big job, that would bring, should she prove equal to it, fine rewards in happiness and growth. It was a job that had in it infinite possibilities of sweetness and beauty. But it was, first and last, a job.

"It looks to me, Hilda Wilson," she mused, "as if the time has really come when you have got to stop thinking of yourself, working for yourself, trying to please yourself."

Dwelling on this thought, and, at moments, strangely happy, she fell asleep.

XXVII

THE DAY THAT WAS PERFECT; AND ITS ENDING

SHE awakened before the early spring day reached her windows through the grimy air of London—awakened with a thrill of that wild uncertain joy; and lay for a brief time puzzling out its source. Then, as if with a burst of light, she remembered.

They had agreed to meet at nine o'clock for breakfast. That was hours off. She tried to go to sleep again, but could not; and so, reading a little, thinking a great deal, busying herself at straightening out the many articles in her trunk and bags, she saw the rosy sunrise through the smoke, and watched the day creep with infinite deliberation into its morning of activity.

At that, she was down at half past eight. She could not wait longer. There was a chance that he might be early, too; and she felt that she must see him at the earliest possible moment, and with him take up again the story of their love. Without him, it was too unreal to be borne.

He *was* early—earlier than she!

She saw him sitting comfortably in the lounge, holding up a morning newspaper, but gazing straight over the top of it at the blank wall.

She suppressed an impulse to laugh aloud; then moved quietly toward him, coming around behind the table, hoping to surprise him. But he heard, and was up on the

instant. And when he had her hand in both of his, and his eyes were on hers, she knew that it was all true, and sat beside him with a sigh of deep contentment.

"I'm glad you were early, Harris," said she, gently. "I've been waiting for hours."

He smiled. "So have I, Hilda. Why didn't you call me up? We could have taken a walk."

"I didn't want to disturb you."

He merely continued smiling, in his quizzical, pleasantly humorous way. And he was looking at her, very steadily. "Don't mind if I stare, child. I've been trying to see you just about all night, and couldn't seem to get you before my eyes."

"Oh, Harris!" she cried softly, flushing—"Neither could I see you! Isn't it dreadful?"

"I wouldn't call it dreadful. It is natural enough."

She glanced around. The room was empty, except for an old gentleman at the newspaper rack. She swiftly extended her hand. He took it in his, bent over it, kissed it.

Hilda smiled dreamily, and looked away.

"Come," said he. "I think we had better go out to breakfast."

When they had found seats and given their order, he said:

"By the way, Hilda, I sent a note out to Priest's house last night, after you went up-stairs, asking him to look me up here this morning."

"Who is Priest, Harris?"

"My solicitor here in London. I thought of some rather important business that I want him to arrange. And then I want him to meet you—for certain reasons. You don't mind, dear?"

"Of course not, Harris."

"I shall be through with him at ten or ten-thirty. After that I thought you might enjoy a motor ride, to Brighton, or Windsor, or perhaps to one of the Cathedral towns. We can come back in the afternoon. Would you like it?"

"Oh, yes, dear! I should love it!"

"Very well. We will do that. I want this to be a particularly pleasant day, Hilda. Because—"

Her eyes sought his face, questioning.

Still he hesitated. So, with a sudden small anxiety, she asked—

"Why the emphasis on to-day, Harris?"

"Because, dear, we *are* a couple of children, you know."

"Yes."

"We are proving that. And we simply must not be so close, and so far from every one else—right now. We agreed to separate, dear."

She made no reply to this.

"We want our great life experience to be perfect, Hilda."

"Yes, Harris—we do, of course."

"So let us—"

"I know, dear," she murmured.

"We can come back and dine together. We will have a beautiful day—a wonderful day. And then—"

She raised her eyes again.

—"we must plan definitely—before night. One of us must go away from London to-night. No more risks, dear."

She soberly inclined her head.

"And I think, to put this thing where no one in the world can ever raise a question to cloud your happiness, one of us should take the first ship for home. It doesn't much matter which one."

Again she merely inclined her head. She would do as

he wished—whatever he might wish. Life was very strange. And in her new spirit of submission she did not know herself, could not think for herself. . . . Not that it mattered. Her life was his.

Mr. Priest called before they were through with breakfast, and Doreyn brought him out to their table. He was a square-faced man, not young, with a long nose and negative gray eyes. And like most men who transact business in the heart of London, he carried a high hat.

After a few moments of rather non-committal conversation, Hilda left the two men to their business. She had more than an hour on her hands. And as the day was pleasant, and the outside air enticing, she walked around to the American Express office and asked for mail. There was a letter from home, addressed in the familiar, rather cramped hand of her mother. It had been forwarded from Paris.

She did not open it at once; for the sight of it, and the feeling of it in her hand brought an odd reaction. She had walked with an extraordinary lightness of foot, as of heart, from the hotel. Grimy old London had taken on a peculiar beauty before her eyes. There was joy in her heart. But now this fine buoyancy had suddenly left her.

She walked slowly, waiting for her poise to return. There seemed no good reason why these sudden thoughts of her mother should be disturbing. She was doing nothing wrong—unless it was wrong to accept the deep and lasting love of a really good man. There was not even any inherent evil in divorce. The thing happened, all the time, among high and low. Surely, where groping individuals had done their best, had tested themselves to the limit of human endurance, it was not wrong to seize on happiness. She told herself, with a sudden little uprush of passionate

feeling, that human beings need happiness—are not complete without it.

She read the letter as she walked across Trafalgar Square and along the Strand, glancing up from moment to moment to pick a way through the hurrying swarms of people. As she read, the atmosphere of her girlhood home recreated itself in her thoughts. And though her spirit rebelled, though she told herself that her mother's rather narrow prejudices were no more reasonable than anybody's prejudices, still she could not shake off the thoughts that kept stirring—stirring. She knew that she could never tell her mother the circumstances of her coming to London or the moods that had brought her clean out of her old conventional self. Yet it had not seemed wrong. The hours during which she had been brought to the great impulse to give, without question, without bargaining—just to give—had been the most exalted of her life. They were hours of inspiration. She seemed to have touched fineness, nobility. . . . But there was, after all, a conflict. Her mother's attitude of mind, and the news the letter brought, intensified that conflict. . . . It was very puzzling.

"You are making a good long stay of it, Hilda," her mother wrote, in part. "I do hope you will soon feel well. If I worry a little about you, as about us all, if I wonder now and then what new influences may be entering your life, and what progress you may be making toward real health, you must forgive me. A mother thinks much. Sometimes I wish that you, too, had been a mother, Hilda, for I am sure that we would be closer then, you and I. Not that I mean to complain, however! I am sure that one of these days you will feel the impulse to sit down and write me a good long letter that will bring us in touch again.

"What I really started out to tell you to-day is that Margie is announcing her engagement to John. They will

probably be married in the autumn—October or November. I gave up my last opposition a week ago or more. I find that Margie's heart is set on it. And since John has come to feel at home about the house I like him rather better. He *has* the McGonigle chin—and it *is* weak! If I hadn't known his father and his Uncle Everett perhaps I shouldn't put so much emphasis on that chin. I don't seem able to help it. Margie says, 'What if marriage is a chance, mother? Isn't it a chance that everybody has to take? Can any other person take it for him? Didn't *you* take it—and when you married could you possibly see how well it was going to turn out? Can't you see that I've got to follow my own feelings, just as the others do, just as you did!' There is no reply that one can make to that, of course. And I finally decided to surrender. I know it is what you would have advised if you had been here. And now I am doing what little I can to help start her off happily. I must say, John seems steady enough these days. He has a pretty good job with the Walker-Wills people, and Mr. Wills told me last night that they are going to increase his salary when he marries. Which is something.

"Margie has never forgotten that 'coppery green' silk you promised to bring her, that you thought would go so well with her hair. I suppose you couldn't very well send it on account of the customs. But surely you will be coming home before fall. You would come for the wedding, anyway."

Hilda walked past the hotel without turning in. It was not yet ten-thirty. And the difficulty of reconciling these conflicting aspects of her life was not, at the moment, growing less.

But finally she gave up, hurried back to the hotel, and hunted almost feverishly about the halls and the lounge for Doreyn. She found him just as he was bidding good-by to the solicitor. And in her spirit she clung to him. The very sight of his shrewd quiet face cleared away some part

of her confusion. Something of the wonder of his love began again to glow in her heart; so much so that he saw in her eyes, when he turned to her, only a soft eagerness, and something of the astonishing timidity and passiveness that he, unwitting, had brought out in her.

"I've ordered the car around, dear," he said, walking with her toward the lift. And he added, in a low voice, "You are beautiful, Hilda."

She raised her eyes to his, between sheer happiness and an impulse to protest. Then her lids dropped; and she stepped into the lift, flushing, with a shy little song in her heart.

"Bring a heavy coat," he called after her. And she nodded, unsmiling.

They went to Windsor—out through Richmond and, where the road permitted, along the Thames. They sat comfortably bundled up in the rear seat of a big touring car, holding hands, smiling a good deal, saying many things that would not bear repeating, and gazing at the peaceful countryside and the drowsy villages with eyes that saw it all in their own golden light.

Sometimes he would lift her hand to his lips and hold it there, reverently. Never had Hilda known such happiness, such complete peace of the spirit. If, at moments, she thought of her mother and Margie, it was with a high affection. Her doubts had gone, as swiftly as they had come. Doreyn it was, of course, who was working this miracle in her. She knew this, and gloried in the fact. When, on a quiet stretch of road, between high hedgerows, he kissed her, she found herself clinging to his collar, resting her forehead against his cheek, while the tears came to her eyes out of sheer feeling.

They had luncheon at the old White Hart in Windsor.

Then they spent an hour wandering about a fairy-land that, in moments of relative lucidity, Hilda knew for the grounds and gardens of Windsor Castle.

They returned by way of Stoke Poges and Uxbridge, entering London by a different road from the one they had followed on the outward journey.

Suddenly, as the car moved swiftly along Bayswater Road, Hilda sat erect, gripped Doreyn's hand more tightly, and looked off to her right, where a park stretched as far as they could see, under great trees.

"Harris!"

"Yes, child?"

"Isn't this Kensington Gardens?"

"Surely."

"I want to get out here."

He spoke to the chauffeur.

"And I want you to let him go, Harris. We can have tea here, and go back in a cab or a bus."

When they were walking in through the gate—Lancaster Gate—she explained. "I haven't been here since my first visit to London, Harris. I loved it then."

So they walked slowly along the broad path toward the open-air restaurant. The late afternoon sun threw long shadows between the huge oaks on the carpet of close-clipped turf. A flock of misty sheep moved slowly across a gray-green vista. And children were everywhere—rugged, rosy young Britons, every one, hard at the childish business of life in this wide calm playground over which to the child mind, reigns and broods the wistful spirit of little Peter Pan.

They found the statue of the fairy hero of the Gardens, and stood before it for several long moments. Hilda

seemed disinclined to talk, but her hand stole into his as they stood there.

They walked by the Round Pond, and paused to watch the children sailing their boats. A chubby three-year-old, with a shock of bright yellow curls, had a very small craft which he was trying to navigate clear of the bank by means of a stick. He was very serious about the business, and stood well back from the water's edge, desperately anxious to preserve his balance.

There were dreams in Hilda's eyes. Doreyn watched her, soberly.

"Oh, it has capsized!"

She murmured this exclamation, then hurried forward.

The attendant nurse was moving over, leaving a still younger child seated on the grass. Seeing that Hilda had caught the boy's blouse in time to prevent further eventualities, she returned.

Hilda, laughing softly, and holding the chubby little fellow very close, fished for the small yacht with her free hand, shook the water out of it, and set it afloat again. Then, moved by a swift warm impulse, she cuddled the boy and pressed his soft cheek against her own. He responded gallantly, with a kiss of wide area and a hug, the latter accompanied by a grunt of sober intensity. Then he freed himself, and looked about for his stick.

There was a choke in Hilda's throat. For a little time, until she could recover her poise, she crouched there, following the child with eyes that had a hungry light in them.

After she had joined Doreyn and they had started to walk away, she said, half bruskly:

"They ought to be more careful about these children."

To which remark he made no reply.

They sat at one of the outdoor tables until the late English twilight was closing down about them.

There were not many persons in the Gardens now. The lights came out, and set their reflections rippling softly in the Serpentine, as these two, arm in arm, walked slowly back toward Lancaster Gate; pausing here and there to gaze at the still shimmering water or at the deeply mysterious shadows beneath the oak trees. Hilda said little, but pressed close against his arm.

Doreyn felt her mood, and did not allow words of his to intrude on it. He was thinking of the mystery and wonder that must stir in a childless woman when she permits her thoughts to range ahead into the unknown beauty of life, into that magical poignant region of the spirit that has been explored by countless millions of women and that yet must always remain uncharted for the new individual.

Never before had he known her to be so free from self-consciousness, so naturally and completely herself.

She stopped once, by the Serpentine, and inclined her head toward a mass of dark shadows in the water.

"That must be Peter Pan's Island," she murmured. And she pressed his arm against her breast.

At the gate, before entering the glaring honking reality of Bayswater Road, she turned and looked back. By the light from the roadway he saw now that her eyes were wet. And he stood there, looking at her, with a prayer in his heart. This splendid woman, whom he had loved so deeply and so long, had on this day and evening, in particular during this twilight hour, bared her very soul to him—and that without a direct word. He was thinking of all that this meant! and of a man's instinct to protect the woman he loves when she is most woman!

Hilda, laughing softly, set it afloat again

At the curb she looked up at him, hesitated, and then laughed a very little.

"Harris, dear!"

"Yes, child."

"Don't get a taxi. I want to ride back on a bus."

He smiled, and in a moment hailed one. They found an empty seat on the top. Other couples were up there. And all about them, as the clumsy vehicle shook and rattled and plunged forward, the traffic of London surged and roared. Yet they were alone . . . in the clouds.

"I wanted to be high," she whispered, nestling close to him.

"I know, dear."

"And, Harris!"

"Yes, girl?"

"I'm going to dress up for dinner—in my prettiest. You must dress, too."

His arm, on the back seat, pressed close about her.

"It has been a perfect day, Harris."

"Perfect, dear."

"It was so many years in coming, Harris."

He smiled now.

An hour later they seated themselves at a small table in a corner of the main dining room of the great hotel. She was dressed as she had dressed on a certain other evening that was and would be memorable in her life, as in the life of Blink Moran—in the gown that had come from Callot's, and about her shoulders the opera wrap of old rose fringed and lined with snowy fur. It pleased and thrilled her to see the frank admiration that was written on his face whenever he looked at her. She felt that she was not worthy of him; but it was comforting that he thought her worthy. The music, the flowers, the glitter of silver and glass, the

brilliant gowns and the general sense of movement—all familiar enough to the woman she had been—came to her as an environment stirringly new. Everything was wonderful; nothing was quite real. She was nibbling at food of exquisite fairy making! she was sipping of nectar.

With the coffee, however, a shadow came.

"Harris, dear—I want to ask you something."

He waited. She hesitated.

"Say it, dear!"

"Well, you spoke of planning . . ."

The shadow touched him now. They looked at each other, soberly.

"That is right, dear. We must plan."

"But we can't go to-night, either of us."

"Why not?"

"This is Saturday night—there isn't a ship until Tuesday or Wednesday."

"Oh, of course you couldn't sail to-night. But I could leave London."

"You could," she replied, quietly, "but you aren't going to?"

He looked his question at this. Hilda leaned forward on the table, in one of her swift practical moods.

"See here, Harris, I have been thinking—all day. I suppose you are right enough. We shall both feel better ten years from now, if we plan all this in the best way. Yes, you are right enough. But—"

"What, dear?"

"It is hard to say."

"Ought anything to be hard—between us."

"No." She flushed a little, very faintly; then brought her hesitant thoughts under control. "It is this, Harris. I don't seem to like the idea of running away from each

other. We *are* children, as you said. But in another sense we are far from children. . . . Don't you see—here we are!"

"Yes," he mused, "here we are!"

"You can't tell what is going to happen in this life, Harris. You know that, much better than I. And since we *are* here, and it is so wonderful, why can't we take the few days that are really ours? Oh, I'll go Tuesday, or Wednesday, whenever there's a good ship! I will, Harris! But why not have just these few more days? Just being happy, and getting acquainted; picking up a little stock of memories to have by us during the many months we shall be apart."

"You are very persuasive, dear."

"But isn't it right—fair?"

"Perhaps it is."

"Wouldn't it be silly to throw these days away? As if we were—well, afraid!"

"Perhaps it would."

"Admit it, Harris!"

"Well, then—it would."

"Good! That's settled. Now, Harris, I want you to take me somewhere this evening—theater, or opera, or something."

His smile broke bounds now—the smile that she loved. And she sat watching it, devouring it, leaning a little forward on her elbows, her lips slightly parted, a clear high color in her cheeks, her gray-blue eyes radiant.

They stopped at the hotel office to leave their keys.

Hilda moved on to the revolving door, and waited.

Doreyn was slow in following. Finally she turned. He was moving toward her, but very slowly. His face was grave, his lips tightly compressed. In his two hands before

him was a letter, which must have been handed him by the clerk.

She felt a curiously sudden sinking of the heart. He was profoundly disturbed—that was plain enough.

She hesitated, uncertain what to do, suddenly reminded of the very large part of his life in which she had had no share. Finally she moved toward him.

He hardly heard her. She even stood beside him for a moment before he raised his eyes—still holding the envelope squarely before him.

"Hilda," he said, very soberly. "I am sorry, dear. I didn't realize." He slipped the letter into the pocket of his overcoat. "Come, we must be starting."

Her hand rested on his arm, and held him.

"Come, dear," said he again.

If he had looked at her he would have seen confusion in her face, confusion that was rapidly resolving into firmness. But he did not look at her.

"No, Harris." Her voice was not wholly steady. "No, dear. I want you to read that letter before we go."

"Oh, that! that is nothing, child."

"Harris! I couldn't help seeing the handwriting. You forget that I used to see it a good deal. And I'm quite sure it is from—Mrs. Doreyn."

"Well—it is."

"We can't go out, now, the way it has made you feel—with that letter unopened in your pocket. We can't, Harris!"

He made no reply. But the sadness in his face fairly hurt her.

"Wait, dear," she managed to say, "I'm going up to my room. I'll be down in a moment. I'll look for you in the lounge."

He stood moodily gazing after her until the lift carried her up out of sight. Then he slowly drew the envelope from his pocket, tore it open, and took out the enclosures. One of these, a newspaper clipping, fluttered to the floor.

A page sprang forward, picked it up, handed it to him.

And Doreyn, with a face in which the lines appeared to be settling more deeply, with eyes that had a baffled look about them, read the clipping, and the short note, the very short note, in which it had been wrapped.

XXVIII

HOW LETTERS CAME, AND MADE IT PLAIN THAT THE LIFE ONE HAS LIVED FOLLOWS ONE LIKE A SHADOW. ALSO HOW HILDA TAPS AT A DOOR; AND HOW SHE COMES TO SIT BY THE WINDOW, READING, WHILE A MAN SMILES IN HIS SLEEP

WHEN Hilda reached the door of her room, she discovered that she had not brought her key. Furthermore, she did not know why she had come up-stairs at all. The one fact that she did seem to understand was that she had to be somewhere else while he was reading the letter.

She walked, trying to think, to the window at the end of the long hall. The coming of that letter had shattered the bubble of her dreams, just at the climax of her one perfect day. The reaction was violent; was still, in fact, beyond her control.

It was not, surely, the mere fact that a letter had come from his wife; nor the fact that she had suddenly been reminded of her own misgivings of the morning, when the letter from her mother had stirred up doubts in her mind —queer, conventional, very puzzling doubts about her sudden coming to London and about divorce. It could not be these things; for, only this morning, she had escaped from those doubts by turning to him. He had been her rock

amid the swirling bewilderments of life. Merely by looking at him, by feeling herself close to him, where she could catch at the gentle shrewdness of his eyes, the quizzical, half-humorous steadiness of his smile, she had been reassured. She had felt his steadiness, his sureness. Come to think of it, it was his character, as it was his love for herself, that had been her refuge, had made it all seem right.

Gradually, during the course of a short five minutes, standing there by the window at the end of the long corridor, she came to see this pretty clearly. Her one point of strength had been his sureness. Now, at the first clear sign of uncertainty, of misgivings, on his part, her whole dream-structure had collapsed.

It hurt. She was bewildered. And such a little thing had brought about this great change. She pressed her hand to her heart as she stood there. It seemed to her that her hands were cold.

She found herself recalling his wife and the two girls. She could remember just how they used to look when they came into the office—the children, very pretty, and always rather expensively dressed; Mrs. Doreyn, a large woman, with a strong chin and a quietly positive manner of speaking. She remembered, too, how bitter she had always felt at the realization of her own doubtful position in that office and in his life. In this recollection there was now, quite suddenly, all the old pain. She fell to wondering about the girls—what they might look like now; what sort of young women they had grown up to be. He must be thinking of them at this very moment. For how could a man help it! And he was peculiarly the sort that would! . . . She even found herself trying to build up mental pictures of the thousand and one memories that must now be rushing up to his mind's eye.

Then suddenly she felt ashamed. She had lost her head, had run away from him. She went straight to the lift cage and rang.

He was sitting in a far corner of the lounge, watching the door.

He rose, and waited for her to join him. He looked very grave; and tired—particularly tired about the eyes.

Her eyes sought his face again—and then again.

"I am going to show it to you," he said, after a little. "Since you saw that I was bothered."

She did not know how to reply to this. Rather mechanically, when he opened the envelope and handed her the two enclosures, she took them.

She glanced down at them, and then read them—the newspaper clipping first. It was an announcement, on the part of Mrs. Harris Doreyn, of the Lake Shore Drive, of the engagement of her daughter, Mary, to . . . she did not read further.

After a moment of hesitation, of trying to think, she unfolded the other paper. On it was written, in pencil, the words:

"Perhaps *this* will interest you, Harris!"

There was no signature. And that was all.

She gave them to him; then leaned back and, for a moment, closed her eyes.

They were seated side by side on a divan, just as they had sat on the preceding evening, after their return from the quiet little restaurant in Soho, after the kiss! . . . Her hand did not seek his now. She felt that there were barriers—barriers through which or around which she had stolen for a few wonderful hours—but through which now she could not reach him.

"It is rather strange," he was saying, soberly . . .

"this really ought to emphasize my freedom, I suppose. At least, it is one more of the old responsibilities removed. I don't know why it upset me so." He mused. "But I suppose the feeling of responsibility for a child that one has reared never really leaves one. . . . And then there are the habits we form. We think we can direct our lives, and all the time we are making habits, building ourselves into situations that *are* our lives, really."

"I know," she murmured, "I have habits, too."

"Of course, child!"

He was steady again! She felt some part of her sureness returning.

"Even during this day, Harris—at moments, now and then—I haven't understood it!—my habits of work, the store and all, have come up in my thoughts as if they were something solid there."

"They are," said he—"just that."

She leaned forward, very tense; and clasped her hands on her knee.

"Harris—"

"Yes, child!"

"Are we all wrong?"

He shook his head, slowly. "No. Not all wrong."

She was thinking hard. "You know, Harris, when I saw how just that handwriting affected you . . ."

"It was having it come just at this time—at the climax of our perfect day. And the surprise of it. For she hadn't written before."

"I know. But when I saw—well, all my doubts came back. I'll be honest, Harris. They did. Everything was so wonderful—and then it—well, it crashed."

"Yes. Our day ended then. We won't go to the theater now."

She shook her head. "We couldn't. It feels so different. . . . Harris, are you sure? Can you let them go like this, after all the years you've spent?" She paused, compressed her lips; and the tears brimmed her eyes. She groped for his hand, and found it. "Harris, up-stairs there—it seemed to me—all at once—that maybe I ought—"

"Better say it right out, dear."

"—maybe I ought to give you up."

He held her hand firmly. For a long moment he did not reply. She felt that he was sober to the point of sadness. But she felt too that he was strong.

"No, Hilda," he said finally. "You must remember that there is nothing new in this. My feelings were stirred—suddenly, sharply. They will be stirred, again. But I have faced all that before, for years. I have faced all of it. I tried to make it plain in my letter—the long letter."

"Yes," she said, slowly, "that is true. You did. Perhaps I haven't understood."

He went on. "There is a sober side to such a marriage as ours, Hilda. It can't all be such an exalted mood as we have been in to-day. We should be thankful for that mood—glad that it lasted so long."

"Yes," she said.

She gave him a half smile.

"Harris, dear—I think I will just go to my room. To be alone. Do you mind?" Her hand gripped his more tightly than she was aware.

"I think it is best, Hilda," he replied. "Among other things, don't forget that you are tired."

She smiled again, a thought more successfully.

"We can talk better in the morning," he added.

"Yes," she murmured.

Thus she left him, still a bewildered woman, still shaken;

and went up to her room to sit long by her window, gazing out over the confusion of buildings that shelter the dramatic confusion of lives that is London.

She was down-stairs before eight the next morning, wandering about the empty lounge, making a pretense of looking through the illustrated weeklies. This for a quarter-hour or more. Then, thinking she might have missed him, she went to the door of the dining-room and looked about among the scattered few who were breakfasting early. He was not there.

She returned to the lounge and tried to read the morning paper. The hands of her wrist watch moved slowly around, indicating half past eight, twenty-five minutes to nine, a quarter to nine. At every footfall, every rustle, every moving shadow, she raised her eyes. People came and went—Americans, English, French, Russians, Germans—but Doreyn was not among them. She found herself growing nervous; but calmed herself with a deliberate effort. He had been tired. Doubtless he had overslept. She told herself that she was glad he had.

It came to nine o'clock—and past nine. She tossed her paper on the table, and sat erect, very tense, tapping on the chair-arm with light fingers and biting her lip. She was wondering if it would do to telephone his room. . . . She decided against this.

Then, at half past nine, a page came through the lounge calling—"Number two-forty-eight, please! Number two-forty-eight!"

That was her own room. She raised her hand. The boy gave her an envelope addressed in an unfamiliar handwriting. She tore it open.

The enclosure was in Doreyn's own hand, written in pencil.

"Very sorry, Hilda, dear," it ran; "but I have had another little attack of my old trouble. I think it is not serious this time, but the doctor insists on keeping me quiet for a few days to guard against a recurrence. So I can't come down. You won't worry, dear! I am not so uncomfortable now. They give me morphine while the pain lasts. But the night was rather bad. I want you to go right on with your plans, but would like to have a glimpse of you before you go. I will work out some scheme for seeing you a little later in the day."

Hilda sat for a time, reading and rereading this simple note. Then, very sober, she went out into the dining-room and sipped a solitary cup of coffee and ate a little toast.

Even now he was thinking of her! He would not permit her to see him until he had "worked out a scheme!"

And he had suffered. The night had been "rather bad." . . . So the excitement of their meeting had been too much for him!

She went out through the hall to the revolving door and looked out into the courtyard, and considered taking a walk. She felt unsettled, aimless, wondering what could be the good in making plans to face life honestly and shape a new course if the Fates were to step in with new complications. . . . She was not going away from London—not with him lying there ill. Of that she was certain.

The situation was quite out of her hands; there appeared to be nothing that she could definitely do.

Yes, there was one thing—she could keep close at hand, in case he should send another message.

She moved away from the door; went back to the lounge. It was profoundly disturbing to think of him as lying there, ill, actually suffering, yet concerned every moment about herself. She decided to make an effort to reassure him.

She found a seat at one of the writing tables, and started a note to him.

She was curiously self-conscious about this. She began it with a "Dear Harris." This was too cold. But she found it difficult to write anything that was not cold. "If only we had had a little more time together," she thought, "so that it would come more naturally."

There was great tenderness in her heart. She had reached the point where no sacrifice could seem too much to offer. It occurred to her that now was the time to write her heart out, to confirm all that had been implied in their talk, their hand-pressures, their kisses; to say the things, in actual, permanent black and white, that would create the final deep glow of happiness in that weary heart of his—to say them fully, completely. It would be a fine thing to give him a letter that he could keep always, as she purposed keeping the letter he had written to her—that he could read from time to time as she purposed reading his, reverently, as one approaches a shrine.

It would take some little time to write such a letter—hours, doubtless. She could send up at once the few words that would reassure him; and then set to work on the real letter. That would give him something to read, and feel, and think of, during the day.

She must write such a letter as she had never written during the whole course of her life thus far. Outside of business, which was another thing, of course, her letters had always been more or less brief evasions of some sort. Never, never had she opened her heart. It had never been possible.

She wondered if it would be possible now. . . . It must be possible! She would drive herself to it—she had will power enough for that! For it was only by giving

what she had never given that she could revitalize him. In some way her strength must be made his strength. No matter what direction their separate lives were ultimately to take, no matter how baffling the tangle of life in which they now found themselves, now was the time when his need of her was greatest. And she knew, deep, deep in her heart, that she could never again let him suffer alone.

She began the letter again, forgetting, in the intensity of her inner struggle, her plan to send up a brief note first. She deliberately forced herself to write a tender phrase. Then she read it, stared at it, tore it up. It simply did not look natural. It seemed forced. It was not like her—she didn't write such things.

There was chagrin in this realization. She sat for a little time gazing down at the white paper and tapping the end of the penholder against her firm chin. How to do a thing that it was not in one's habits to do—that possibly it was not in one's nature to do—that was the question. She had never had much confidence in words. Words counted for little at the Hartman store, excepting when they bore some close relation to figures.

So there was still ice to be broken! The thought was disheartening.

She straightened up and looked out about the room. She was thinking intently. Their decision, of the evening, to renounce their love, had not presupposed any such real need as had now sprung up. They had reached the heights and the depths of life—all within one short wonderful day, one perfect day. There had come reactions that were overwhelming in their strength. And now, in this new bewilderment, in this fresh difficulty in finding the way, the thought was developing in her mind that perhaps, after all, the best way to give her life to him would be to give up all

efforts to puzzle it out and just do the simplest, most natural thing. And the most natural thing for Hilda Wilson would certainly be, simply and naturally, to take hold. Certainly, in some way, she would have to give him a fine clear proof that her life was his—something that he could treasure in his memory as long as he should live. If she couldn't write it, then it would have to take the form of action, which was, after all, more within the realm of her natural self. What she found herself unable to write, she would have to *do*. . . . Just so long as it was giving, not taking!

She pondered once again the possibility of working an injury to him by appearing in too close a relationship to him. No very serious problems arose on this side. He was, after all, moving for a divorce. His position as a sober, exceedingly prosperous man of affairs was protection enough in itself; for the world protects men. And finally, his illness. Perhaps people would think her a nurse. She was not conscious of caring particularly about this, one way or the other. She believed now that she was the one person to blame for his present illness, first by permitting him to suffer so long alone, and then by stirring him so deeply when he was unable to bear it. If this was an extreme view, she was unable to think of it as such. It was a reflection of her feelings; and her feelings, with very little regard for the reasons her conscious self might construct, were driving her toward him so straight and so fast that not all the barriers a hostile world might have been able to construct could have kept her away from him many hours longer.

She had been scribbling and marking aimlessly on the paper before her. She tore this now into small bits, which she dropped into the basket beneath the table.

She wondered where his room was.

She could not very well ask at the desk. But she walked out there now, and stood looking over a railway guide while she thought this out. Then, finally, she took out one of her cards, wrote on it the first few friendly words that came into her head, slipped it into an envelope, wrote his name—"Harris Doreyn, Esq."—on the envelope and handed it to a clerk. "Please send that to Mr. Doreyn," she said.

The clerk consulted the guest book at his elbow, scribbled a number on the envelope, and rang for a page.

Hilda tried to read the number, upside down; but just then the clerk's hand closed over it.

She stood very quietly there; but it seemed to her that her heart was beating loudly.

The page appeared. "Six-fourteen!" said the clerk bruskly, and turned away.

That was it, then—room six hundred and fourteen. Sure that the clerk had now forgotten her existence, she stepped after the page, dropped a shilling into his hand and took the envelope from him.

It occurred to her a moment later that the natural thing would have been to let the message go through. It could not have affected her plans. Were her nerves shattered, then? Surely not! They must not be. Perhaps a few such small but rather conspicuous blunders would teach her calmness and poise in this new tangle of problems.

It took some time to find six hundred and fourteen. She found herself ascending stairways and roaming through long halls—for she would not ask. It seemed to her that chambermaids and floormen eyed her. She passed groups of guests—Americans, in one instance—and walked by them briskly as if she knew where she was going.

Finally she found herself in the six hundreds. She passed six-forty-two, forty, thirty-eight, and on down. At

last there it was—the door that bore the numerals, six, one, four.

For the moment her breath left her. It was curious—it seemed that she could not breathe at all. And there was something of that old pressure at the back of her head, and the pounding in the temples. She had not foreseen that it would be so hard, so physically hard. . . . And there were innumerable shooting little fears and surmises rising to confuse her. What if he were not alone, for one thing! She recalled that he had had to have some other person address his note to her.

Thinking this over, she could not see that it made any difference. She made a last firm effort to control herself, stepped forward, and tapped lightly on the door. And with that light tapping came a change in her; as if, from this moment and because of this act, she would be in some sense a different sort of woman from the sort she had always been. . . . Not a worse woman necessarily (she was not certain about this!)—perhaps a deeper and better one—certainly a different one. The one important thing, she felt now, was to be a less turbulent, calmer woman, a woman who would give, not take. And this, she began to believe, as in response to a voice—his voice—calling, "Come in!" she turned the knob, she was going to be.

She stepped in, closing the door after her.

He was alone—lying quietly in bed, his face flushed and beaded with perspiration, his eyes half closed. He looked at her, almost stupidly.

She moved to the bedside and sat there. Her hand sought his forehead.

"Don't scold me, Harris," she said softly. "I had to come."

Her hand was in his now.

"Oh, Hilda! . . ." That was all he seemed able to say at the moment.

She gently withdrew her hand from his, and stroked his temple and cheek.

"Hilda"—he began again; then, "it's the morphine they gave me during the night, dear. My head is muddy. Did my note make sense?"

"Of course, Harris." She looked thoughtfully at him. "These attacks are very painful then, dear?"

"Oh, yes. No doubt about that. This last one was nearly five hours long. They drug me to ease the nervous shock of it."

Hilda's light hand was still on his forehead. "Do you know, dear," she said, musingly, "I've never suffered—"

"Oh—child!"

"Not in this way. I have so very much to learn, Harris."

"You mustn't stay long, Hilda. I have called in a man to look out for me. He will be coming back before long. . . . You know, girl, you shouldn't have come. Really, you shouldn't."

She was smiling, faintly.

"You will go, Hilda?"

Slowly she shook her head. "Please don't scold me, Harris—but I can't let any one else take care of you."

"Oh, Hilda—no! I couldn't forgive myself!"

She was grave again. He was looking up at her, rather anxiously, and a thought confused.

"I'll be glad to get my head back," he said. "I don't like this drugging."

Still she was thinking.

Finally she let her eyes rest on his—her steady eyes, rather large and of a deep gray-blue color, just as they had been in all his memories of the younger Hilda.

"Harris," she said, "I don't like to antagonize you. And I don't want to excite you. That would be hurting you just when, more than anything else, I want to help. But really, there isn't any use of your trying to send me away. Not now. I can't go. I won't go."

"But, Hilda—"

"I won't go, dear. If I'm ever to be of any use to you, after—after all that has happened—now is the time."

"But you haven't thought, girl! You don't realize—"

"Harris, I have thought of everything." There was quiet strength in the gray-blue eyes. They were rather inescapable. "The time for me to be with you is when you need me. And you will never need me more than now."

"But, Hilda—"

"Harris, dear, we can't argue this. A woman has to do what she feels she ought to do. This is the way I feel. It has taken me a long, long time to come to this point. But now—well, here I am! Probably I know pretty accurately what is in your mind about it. . . . The conventions? They have hurt me quite as much when I was fighting desperately to observe them as they could possibly hurt me now when I am beginning to feel, for the first time in my life, like my true self. Besides, we aren't defying them in the spirit; only in the letter. . . . The—well, the intimate little details of caring for you? Harris, I will love them. Just remember, dear, that I am a pretty active woman. I have to be doing something. And—well, you need me, dear." She pursed her lips; her eyes were filling. "Harris," she concluded, "please don't send me away!" And leaning forward, she touched her lips to his forehead; then sat up again and took his right hand in both of hers.

She was studying his face with a new touch of humility in her own. He felt this.

"No"—she was slowly shaking her head—"no, Harris, I can't go. Not while you need me so. When you are well again—yes, I will go then. But not now, dear—not now!"

She gave him no chance to reply to this; but got up and looked about the room. It was in some disorder. She straightened out the clutter on the bureau; hung his clothes in the closet; put away his shoes on the closet floor.

He followed her with his eyes, while she folded a towel and hung it over the back of the washstand. The room already had a new atmosphere.

She came to the bedside. "Harris, you had better tell me the doctor's name."

He complied. The confused expression he had worn was leaving his face.

"I have a notion that you will sleep now," she said, quietly studying him—"if you are left alone. Then, later on, if you feel like it, I will find something to read to you."

He smiled now. "Yes, child," he said, "you go now. And—" he caught at her hand—"and . . ."

She let him hold her hand for a moment, knowing that deep emotions within him were pressing for utterance.

"Now, Harris," she said, releasing his hand and smoothing the covers, "let me turn your pillow, and you sleep a bit."

He sighed as his head sank back. "And you will go, Hilda?"

"As far as the window," said she. "I'm going to look around among your books for something to read." She turned to the table. "I was interested in what you said about the New Testament, Harris—in your letter—"

"As far as Paul," he interrupted, eager even in his drowsiness.

"Yes, as far as Paul. You called it essential religion, I

think—some such phrase, anyway. I have thought once or twice since then that a little religion, some sort of religion—"

A sudden, quite unforeseen uprush of emotion caught her throat. She broke off abruptly.

He lay quiet. Soon she heard him breathing slowly and rhythmically.

When she looked up from her book, later, she saw that he was smiling in his sleep.

XXIX

HOW A MAN SMILES AGAIN, AND NOT IN HIS SLEEP THIS TIME. WITH A GLIMPSE OF THE HAPPINESS THAT LIES BEYOND TEARS

THE doctor's name was Henderson. He was a man of middle age, like Doreyn's solicitor, Mr. Priest. Unlike Mr. Priest, he wore a hat that was neither high nor of silk; and, also unlike that austere man of the law, he leaned toward a brusk, rather businesslike professional manner. And whereas Mr. Priest, in his attitude toward Hilda, never for an instant swerved from a severely correct, painfully impersonal bearing that at times chilled her heart, Doctor Henderson was inclined to regard her with a frank, even resentful curiosity—"brutal," was the adjective he sometimes stirred to the surface of Hilda's thoughts.

Yet she got on rather well with both. They were not so different, either of them, from types of men that had played various parts in her business transactions of the last ten years. She accepted the fact that they did not like her, while respecting them for the workmanlike manner in which each attended to his business.

Doreyn's condition did not improve at once. And after a day of anxiety, the question arose of moving him. Doctor Henderson favored a hospital, but was not seriously opposed to Hilda's carrying out her hope of finding private quarters where she might continue her care of him. It

was plain that she was an exceedingly competent woman; and equally plain that the patient rested more comfortably, at least in mind, when she was near. Accordingly, armed with the physician's consent, Hilda called in Mr. Priest and laid before him the question of finding a furnished apartment. The solicitor moved quickly; and on the third day of his illness, Doreyn was taken in an ambulance from the great crowded hotel in the Strand to a comfortable second floor—or first, as the English term it—of a house in Lancaster Gate. This location because Hilda had expressed a desire to be near Kensington Gardens.

And here Hilda watched over him, assisted by a day and a night nurse, each of whom soon learned to trust and respect the rather mysterious Miss Wilson who was so obviously the head of the little household. Through the late weeks of spring, and on through June into midsummer, they worked, these three women, to restore some portion of the shattered digestive apparatus of their invalid. Hilda had never seen such suffering as now became sadly familiar to her. Nor had she ever seen such courage. If there might, before, have been an occasional lurking doubt in her mind as to the completeness of her love for this man, certainly there was no doubt now. She cooked with her own hands much of the very small amount of food that he was able to eat. She relieved the nurses, from time to time, whenever one or the other seemed more nearly exhausted than usual. She slept when she could, and little by little gave up the thought of any consistent outdoor exercise. . . . Once before in this momentous year she had found herself tied to a sick room; but that had been a very slight strain indeed compared with this. It had prepared her for this, doubtless.

Toward the end of July, following a period during which

Doreyn had appeared to be approaching convalescence, had even managed to sit up on several consecutive days and discuss some business matters with Mr. Priest, he was seized with another series of attacks. By the thirty-first of July Hilda knew that he was a very sick man—more dangerously ill, indeed, than during those anxious weeks of the spring and early summer. Doctor Henderson was in during the night of the thirty-first and stayed for more than an hour. By mid-forenoon of August first two consulting physicians had been called to the case; and during the days that followed Hilda heard them speaking cryptically of a possible "damming back," with some new danger of a "septic condition."

During this period—from late July to early August, Hilda worked tirelessly. For days she refused so much as to leave the apartment.

These were the days when stock exchanges in all great cities were closing with a snap; when great liners were dodging, in painted disguises and with all lights out, into unfamiliar harbors; when German ships, laden to the rails with coal, were slipping out of American ports by night to supply those roving commerce destroyers that had been cut off from their base by the swift and complete isolation of Germany; when Austria, Germany, France, England and little Belgium were rushing troops to the various fronts, commandeering horses, automobiles, farm wagons, railways and every man of a fighting age; when sudden declarations of war were tearing Europe asunder.

All this meant little to Hilda. It passed her by like a series of strange dreams; for she was fighting to save the life of the man she loved. She was pale, tense, but calm —always calm. She was now admittedly the ablest nurse of the three. She had mastered every technical detail of

the treatment. A whisper from Doreyn would find her, day or night, at his side.

The most that the morphine could do for him, it appeared, was to relieve his conscious mind from its normal activities and perceptions. He had become a man who suffered with only intermittent consciousness of the fact that he was suffering. At times he knew Hilda, even spoke to her with a tenderness that touched deep chords within her. At other times the drug, or the pain, or both, appeared to craze him, and he would struggle with surprising strength to escape from his bed, and even from the room. More than once Hilda found herself actually helping to wrestle with him and force him back to the bed. And the need of such activity had sprung up so swiftly that she went through these painful experiences with little thought of their strangeness; they were simply situations that had to be met as they came. The thinking about them would come later.

One day she looked at her face in the mirror. It was a white tired face. The grayish half moons under her eyes explained the smarting and the sensation of strain she felt in them day and night. She recalled that Miss Nichols, the night nurse, had been urging her of late to get out into the open air. Even Doctor Henderson, whose bruskness of manner was lately veering toward a reluctant respect—this man had even taken her arm, only this morning, and said, "Don't draw too heavily on your reserve strength, Miss Wilson. Not right now. Better get out and run around a bit. You will be more useful with some outdoor air and some sleep."

He was right, of course. The struggle might continue for weeks, even months. And since no human being could go on indefinitely at her present gait, she decided to con-

serve her strength. Accordingly she took to walking out for at least an hour each day.

There had been a period, during parts of June and early July, when Doreyn had enjoyed having her read aloud—mostly economic studies and modern European history, with a few of the very recent English novels. Also there had been two or three excursions into the rather perplexing subjects of feminism and socialism. It had interested her to follow the surprisingly wide range and the definiteness of his information. She began to see the part that a rich mental background had played in his growth as a business executive. She had not before thought much about wide reading as a practical asset in the day's work. She began to see this now, and to become conscious of the real gulf between him and herself. The thought sobered her. And at the same time she realized that in following the reachings out of his mellow rich mind she was beginning a new sort of education for herself.

Toward the latter part of August the international mail service, temporarily crippled by the fresh adjustments of war time, began to operate on a more nearly normal basis—at least between England, France and America.

One day letters came from Adele and from Ed Johnson, the latter forwarded from Paris. She had had a little correspondence with Adele and Blink during the summer. They had been married in June, after some small difficulty with the intricate French legal requirements in the matter of marriage between foreigners.

Adele's letter was short. She and Blink had decided to leave Paris before the Germans should get any nearer. They were coming to London, and would look her up, in case she was still there.

"I saw Juliette and the baby yesterday," Adele concluded, "and they're well enough so far but I don't know what Juliette's going to do because there isn't any work here. I never saw Paris so dead—it gives you the creeps and it's awfully sad everywhere, with the men all gone and most everything closed up and the girls and women crying so it breaks your heart. We have done all we could for Juliette, Blink has got some gold and we're going to leave some of it with her, but of course in a time like this you can't do more than you can, Blink says, and I guess he's right.

"Anyway I guess there's lots of folks, thousands of them that are going to be starved or hurt and die this fall without there being anybody to care or know anything about it one way or the other.

"It's a terrible time.

"Well, this is all now, from yours very truly,

"Adele Moran."

Ed's letter was a pleasant and characteristic bit of himself. "He is a good friend, Ed is!" she thought, with a warm glow in her heart. Then the picture rose of Ed's one great moment when he ejected Will Harper from Adele's room. Hilda even smiled faintly, at the memory; and she thought again, "Ed is a good friend."

His letter was all chat and gossip of the store.

"You ought to be here, Hilda," he wrote, in part. "There's new work for all of us. We're digging up stock from concerns you never heard of. There's nothing coming from Europe at all. Joe Hemstead himself looked after your work in Paris this summer. Funny, he missed you all round. He just got back Saturday. The war caught him. He tried to get through to Havre with a lot of model gowns in an automobile, but they took the car away from him near Rouen, said the chauffeur was a Ger-

man spy, and shot him, for all anybody knows. They shut J. H. up himself for two days in a barn, and he might be there yet if he hadn't given a boy a hundred francs to take a note to our ambassador and promised him a hundred more if he brought back the answer. Then he walked twenty-five miles in a day, caught a train to Havre, got across the channel in a fishing boat, and just caught a ship home, traveling steerage."

Hilda mused over this. "J. H. was here in England, then, this summer," she thought. "If I had known it I would have tried to see him." The old world of her working habits was suddenly close to her. She fell to wondering how they were solving the extraordinary problems that her own department must certainly be facing at this moment.

Then she shook off the mood, and read on:

"We're doing pretty fair business at that. I'm running about three per cent. above last year. The store as a whole is doing better than that. And I expect to pick up all right in the fall when the glove trade begins to move in the cooler weather. But between you and I, we're pretty near the only store in New York that's doing any business at all.

"You remember that other thing I spoke about in Paris —that mean story. Well, I run it down, I think. May Isbell started it, just kind o' half saying things. And then Stanley Aitcheson did the rest of it, as I thought. I don't know what he's got against you, but he was sure peeved. He's going to be married in October to a Philadelphia girl. I told Stanley I was going to write you this. Told May too."

Hilda read this paragraph a second time; and her eyes filled. There was not a hint in the letter—and she read on to the end to make sure—regarding the things she and

Ed had said at the last, apparently not so much as a memory of the queer hard mood she had been in. Ed had always seemed a rather funny little man. But she knew now that she would never smile at him again. She recalled wondering often, in the old days before her life had changed so, what could be the quality in Ed that made the men stand by him so warmly. She remembered, as she had before, that on those occasions, once or twice a year, when Ed seemed to find it necessary to drop all restraints and go off on what could only be termed a drunk, the other men always hunted him up and looked after him, and later suppressed all talk of the incident. She understood now why they did this.

In her daily walks from this time on, she gradually became aware of the immense catastrophe that was so rapidly engulfing all Europe, if not, in a sense, all the world. Soldiers were drilling now, everywhere. They were even camped in Hyde Park. The great old city, cumbersome as always, slow to rouse at the call of danger, began at last to show signs of some real military preparation. Amateur police appeared, to take the place of those strong young men that were needed at the front. Recruits drilled in business suits, and in sweaters and caps. Khaki-clad troops marched to the railway stations and disappeared, marched and disappeared. Boy scouts appeared everywhere as guards and messengers. There were guns, pointing upward, on the roofs of the government buildings. Much was said about a possible raid from the German Zeppelins.

Blink and Adele came, early in September. Hilda saw them on several occasions, but never for more than a few minutes at a time. She made no effort to conceal her trouble from them. If she did not talk freely, it was only because she could hardly trust herself to talk at all. And

then, they asked no questions. But they caught enough to understand; and she felt their sympathy. Blink, in his quiet way, offered to help, and appeared gratified when she used him now and then for errands.

The only other personal problem involved in her new program of daily exercise was the matter of rest. She knew now that she must manage to have some sleep. She solved the problem by forcing herself to lie down whenever there happened to be a good opportunity, day or night. And she made it a rule not to get up for an hour, unless she was called; and this whether her eyes closed or not. At the first trials, not unnaturally, they did not close; and she lived through torments of struggle against the current of racing, all but uncontrollable thoughts. But little by little she won this battle. Within four or five days she had reached a point at which she could usually drop asleep at the first opportunity, just as she had learned to do during those now curiously remote days of the baby's illness, back at the queer little Hotel de l'Amerique.

With the increase of strength and reassertion of her normal poise that came with this little victory, Hilda soon found herself accepted more completely than ever as the recognized head of the household. Doctor Henderson, quite unconsciously, it seemed, fell to discussing the medical details of the case with greater and greater frankness. And Hilda's mind seized on every detail. Soon he was quite as likely to give his instructions to her as to Miss Nichols . . . And Hilda, seeing that the strain was beginning to tell seriously on both the nurses, relieved them in every way that she could. One night, on waking and stepping softly into the sick room, she was struck by the pallor and weariness on Miss Nichols' face. She slipped out to the kitchen, beat up an egg-nog, and brought it in

to her. The nurse was confused by this considerate act; but though she found difficulty in conveying either her thanks or her protestations, Hilda did not miss the gratitude in her eyes, and her aching heart warmed to the girl.

Even the two consulting physicians, who at first had looked askance at her, gradually came to accept her. And as the time approached when their graver manner, their more frequent low-voiced discussions in the front room and their increasing willingness to try possible remedies of the more unusual and desperate sort, made it evident that none too much hope was left, they talked to her quite frankly.

One day, in mid September, when their invalid was weak to the point of collapse, Hilda called them all to the apartment.

"Is there any other possible effort that we could make?" she asked, very quietly.

The three physicians considered the matter.

"Is there a serum?" she continued.

"Nothing that is not still in an experimental stage," replied Doctor Henderson.

"But, Doctor, hasn't the time come when we are justified in trying experiments? As it stands now, with all that has been done, we are certainly losing ground."

The older consultant bowed gravely at this. "Yes, Miss Wilson," he said, "we are losing ground."

"Then," said she, "it seems to me that we must venture every possible experiment, choosing first the one that you may think the least dangerous."

After only a little more discussion she left them. But half an hour later Doctor Henderson told her that they had agreed to administer a serum in the morning.

The first effect of the experiment was gratifying. Doreyn

rested more easily. The serum appeared to bring a little strength to him and to increase his flagging powers of resistance. For several days the strain perceptibly relaxed about the bedside.

A great deal else was taking place during these days that engaged her attention.

One matter was a curious conversation with Blink and Adele. They met her one day at the corner of Bayswater Road. They were on their way to see her.

As Hilda was just starting out for her hour afoot, and had no particular destination in mind, she walked with them through Kensington Gardens to the restaurant and sat while they had tea. She could take nothing herself. She was forcing herself to eat at meal times by a mechanical exercise of will; but found the process too distasteful to be carried on at other hours.

She found herself looking at these two who had played so vital a part in her recent life with a not unkindly detachment. Blink was quite the same—steady, friendly, a little slow in thought. He was graver than usual now. And Adele was very sober, not far from tears, indeed. Her mouth drooped at the corners.

"We've been talking over this war thing, Hilda," said Blink. "And we can't seem to figure out what we ought to do."

"And so," put in Adele, with a nervous eagerness, "we made up our minds to talk with you about it."

"And get your advice," completed Blink.

"It's this"—from Adele—"we've been wondering whether Blink ought to go to war."

"You see"—from Blink—"they have made up a corps of foreign volunteers at Paris."

Hilda looked from one to the other, and swiftly reflected

on life and its changes. Water had flowed under the bridge here, too! These two were man and wife now, were one, indeed, and turned to her for help with a fine simplicity.

"Why on earth should Blink go?" she asked.

Adele rushed to explain, eagerly disavowing her own interest in the matter. "You see, Hilda, Blink has lived a good many years in France—and I've been there quite a while. We've both earned our living there. Blink has made all he's got out of the French, or pretty near all. Sometimes, when we try to think about it, it seems as if it would be only fair to help. They're having such dreadful trouble, the French people. You just don't know, Hilda, unless you've seen it. Sometimes, like you said, we can't see why on earth Blink should do it. And other times we feel that he just ought to. You know. We get mixed up. And so to-day we made up our minds to ask you, and do whatever you said."

Hilda was slowly shaking her head. At the sight, the corners of Adele's mouth began, hesitatingly, to lose their droop. And a faint light crept into her eyes.

"If you leave it to me, then," said Hilda, "Blink will do nothing of the sort."

"Oh, do you really feel that way!" murmured Adele.

Blink was silent.

"Most decidedly, child. There are only two reasons for going into this terrible war—patriotism or adventure. Adventure isn't excuse enough. And it isn't a question of patriotism in this case."

"I wouldn't try to hold him back," began Adele. . . .

Hilda reached around the corner of the table, and took her hand. "Of course you wouldn't, child," she said gently. "But Blink is a Dutch-American. You two just

wait until the Dutch-Americans begin fighting. And don't put the Dutch part first, either!"

During the silence that followed, Hilda found her thoughts running back to other days.

"Did you leave some money with Juliette?" she asked, abruptly.

"All we could," said Blink—"a hundred francs. I didn't dare leave more, it was so hard to get gold. And we don't know yet how much of our savings we're going to lose."

"I wish I could send some," mused Hilda. "But I can't get it on my letter of credit, even yet." It occurred to her, too, that Doreyn's stock of gold was very low. . . . "What do you suppose the child will do?"

They shook their heads. All three found only blankness at the farther end of this thought—a minute personal share of the blankness that already confronted the people of all Belgium, Austria, and parts of France, Russia and Germany.

The conversation flagged after this. Each was thinking of dainty little Juliette and her baby.

"It's got awfully strong," said Adele. "It sits right up—you know, holds its head up—and laughs when you make faces." Then she fell silent.

When they parted, in Lancaster Gate, Blink gripped Hilda's hand.

"I guess you're right, Hilda," he said. "It isn't up to me."

"No, Blink, it isn't up to you. You stick to Adele."

"Oh," cried that young woman, "I'd let him go! I'd send him!" And the corners of her mouth quivered downward.

"He isn't going, though!" said Hilda, bruskly.

"No, Adele," said Blink himself then, "I'm not going."

Hilda mounted the steps; then turned and looked after them. They were walking arm in arm—Blink with all the smooth tiger-like grace of his big perfect body; Adele, a slim girlish figure, very graceful, too, and very small beside him.

Adele turned, and waved impulsively. Hilda waved back.

She let herself in then, and sighed as she mounted the stairs. What a queer complex thing was this that men and women call happiness!

She went to the locked drawer in her bureau shortly after this, and emptied out two bags of gold into her lap. There was not much of it left. Surprisingly little, in fact! She decided to make an opportunity to speak to Mr. Priest about this. The only hesitancy she felt was in regard to speaking at all to him. She had not won him over as she had, gradually and with only a slow realization of the fact, won over the physicians and nurses. Perhaps because there had been fewer opportunities to see him. Though she doubted this reason as her mind formulated it. The solicitor had never had for her anything but a cold, studiously professional respect. . . . Then she decided, with a little wave of her hands, that it did not matter. Her concern was to keep up the fight for Doreyn's life. She would call Mr. Priest up in the morning, the first thing, on the telephone.

But Mr. Priest was not at his office. A little later he appeared at the apartment.

"I have been trying to reach you, Mr. Priest," said Hilda. "I wanted to ask you if Mr. Doreyn made any plans for getting money. There is only a little of his left. My own is all gone. And lately I have not succeeded in getting any large amounts on my letter of credit."

"I called to speak to you on that point, Miss Wilson," replied the solicitor. He was quite formal. His top hat, resting as usual on the table, was as polished and hard as himself. "Mr. Doreyn left explicit instructions with me. My understanding has been that I was not to convey them to you except in the event of his death."

Hilda looked at him, very calm, and paler. She said nothing to this.

"Of course," Mr. Priest went on, "we have no such contingency to face. The letter which I have for you need not be delivered, as the matter stands now. But you will need money, of course; and since Mr. Doreyn can not be consulted at this time, I will advance whatever sums may be needed, taking your receipt. I am the only one who runs any risk in the matter, and I will gladly undertake it. The situation is an emergency. It must be met as an emergency."

"Then he has money that can be reached?" said Hilda.

"Oh, yes—a fairly large amount, in gold, deposited in my name at my own bank."

Hilda studied him more closely. This seemed to her an odd arrangement.

"I have been considering this matter, Miss Wilson, and have decided that the time has come, in this emergency, to tell you something of Mr. Doreyn's plans, as he has entrusted them to me."

"They concern me, then?" said Hilda, coldly.

"They do. Before he left Chicago last winter, he relinquished the greater part of his interests in the Doreyn Company. More than half of his holdings he placed in trust to be sold from time to time to employees at a nominal price, the proceeds to be divided between his two daughters, or their children, in case they should marry. The greater

part of the remainder he made over directly to his daughters. He had other interests and investments. I do not know in just what ways these were disposed of, beyond the fact that he settled a large sum on his wife. Out of all his fortune he reserved only a relatively small part for himself; enough, however, to insure a fairly comfortable income. Early in the spring he had a considerable credit transferred from Chicago and New York to London—an amount, altogether, of nearly forty thousand pounds, or two hundred thousand dollars. During July, before the war began, he succeeded, by a very adroit use of his strong influence, in converting more than half of this into gold. He has been a very far-sighted man, Miss Wilson."

"He is a very far-sighted man," replied Hilda. "But you said that this concerned me."

"It does, decidedly. This total of about forty thousand pounds—part of which is, for the moment, valueless—represents, I believe, something approaching half the amount that Mr. Doreyn had reserved for his personal use. This money—or as much of it as has been deposited with me in gold, will belong to you."

Hilda's face did not change. The words on her tongue —"Of course I can not accept it!"—were not uttered. She merely waited.

"He has already given it outright to you, the only qualification being a personal understanding with me that the exchange was not to be made until his death. He chose this method, I believe, in order that no discussion need arise in the event—"

"I quite understand," said Hilda.

"Very well, then, Miss Wilson. You will see that in the circumstances, since he is quite helpless, I feel that I am justified in following any reasonable instructions that you

may choose to give. And I have brought a small bag of gold with me, thinking that you might have immediate needs. . . . You will kindly sign this receipt."

He had produced the bag from an inner pocket, and the receipt from his wallet.

Hilda reached mechanically for the receipt, took it to the table, and signed it.

"Thank you, Miss Wilson," said he. He stepped to the table, took up his hat, and thoughtfully polished it with his sleeve. He was obviously lingering. Which struck her as rather odd.

Then he looked up; and she saw in his dry square face the first indications of emotion that she had ever seen there.

"While I had not originally intended to mention it, I think I had better tell you, Miss Wilson, that in his letter to you, to be delivered in—in—"

Hilda nodded bruskly. "Yes, yes!" she said.

"—he anticipates an unwillingness on your part to receive this money for yourself. He has felt, naturally enough, after making full provision for others dependent on him, that the relatively small amount remaining was—well, consecrated to a life with—well, with yourself. Therefore he could do no less with this money than make it over to you. And he suggests in case you personally have no need of it—"

"I don't need it," said Hilda, rather mechanically, still studying him.

"Quite so! Well, that you would then perhaps find ways in which it could be used to aid others. In his letter I believe he speaks of the possibility of helping destitute persons from the war zone or—"

Hilda was finding it difficult to listen. She raised a protesting hand.

He was still talking on—"Of course there will be many, many good uses to which money may be put in these sad times, Miss Wilson. . . ."

"Please!" she murmured.

Then she saw that there were actually tears in the man's eyes. And he was extending his hand. Their hands had never touched before.

She took his hand now. Her own eyes were frankly wet.

"We are going to save him," she said, "if—"

"If it can be done, you will do it. Good day, Miss Wilson!" Then he hurried out.

Hilda went to her own room and dried her tears. Then she slipped into the sick room.

The younger nurse was sitting by the bed, fanning Doreyn.

His head was propped up a little way, on two pillows. He was very white, very thin. His eyes, now sunken, were closed. The skin was tight over his gums. One fragile hand lay on the coverlet. It seemed to Hilda almost a transparent hand.

She bent over him. Yes, he was breathing. But she knew with a catch at her heart and a momentary breathlessness, that she had never seen such utter illness as this.

She looked down at the nurse, smiled gently, and took the palm leaf fan from her tired fingers.

"I want you to lie down," she said. "I will do this now."

The nurse hesitated, then, with a grateful look, tiptoed out.

And Hilda, sitting quietly there and slowly wielding the

fan, looked at him with eyes from which the tears welled unheeded.

She was thinking of her life and of his, of the conflicting currents that toss helpless humans to and fro and confuse their courses. She was thinking of how he had loved—with a power and a sweetness that were far beyond her own capacity and her spiritual endurance—how he had, in every possible literal sense, given his life to her, even when he had been struggling most earnestly and patiently to give his life to those others whose claim on him antedated her own. And she was thinking of life itself: of pretty little Juliette and her baby, soon perhaps to starve in war-racked Paris; of her own mother, looking, not quite resigned, down the last long slope of life; of Margie, plunging wilfully, perhaps even rightly, into the bewildering complexities of marriage.

And then, as if by a sudden shaft of inner light, she saw Annie Haggerty, back there at the store. Poor, sulking, uncomprehending Annie, who had "gone wrong." She recalled her own resentment against Annie, and how she had objected, when Martin asked her to let Annie stay on in her department and "have another try." There were always Annie Haggertys in the store. And she had always thought the men too easy with them. . . . She wondered what had become of Annie. And, quite suddenly, pictures rose in her mind of dark city streets and of the prowling figures of bold-eyed girls who, every one, had come from somewhere, who, every one, had felt the bitter resentment against their bewildered lost souls, of women who called themselves good. . . . She could see Annie—now—her pretty sulky face. And the bewilderment in her eyes.

And now, doubtless, in that same store, men and women were still whispering, as men and women will—very hard,

very superior—that Hilda Wilson had "gone to pieces" in Paris. Annie herself, if they had kept her on so long, had surely heard it! . . .

Late that night Doctor Henderson came in.

Hilda took Miss Nichols' place at the bedside while the nurse stepped into the hall to show her chart and receive instructions. Once again she wielded the fan. Once again she gazed, sadly but with a deepening tenderness, at the fragile, desperately worn face of the man who had loved her for so long. She was glad that there was not so much pain in his expression. It almost seemed as if he was smiling. But then the lights were dim, and the shadows tricky. She could hear nurse and doctor talking low in the hall.

He *was* smiling!

Hilda, aquiver, leaned forward, shifted the fan to her left hand, and took his wasted fingers within her own.

His eyes opened, slowly. They wandered about the room until they found her.

"Hilda!" he said.

She had never seen an expression of such utter happiness on a human face.

"Yes, dear," she murmured. "It is Hilda."

His fingers tightened perceptibly about hers.

"Isn't this—beautiful?" he said. "Beautiful, Hilda! You are right here with me."

"Yes, dear," she whispered.

His eyes wandered again; then fixed themselves on some point on the wall over her shoulder. And his brows closed down a little. It was the old look! He was trying, oh, so hard! to think.

"There have been dreams," he said. "Life is very puzzling, Hilda. I don't know why it is so. Perhaps it

couldn't have been. I mean it might not have worked out, after all."

"Yes, dear—I know."

"Maybe there was just too much in the way—things, I mean—and lives. It might not have worked out . . . all we have done, you and I, and all we have been."

Hilda could not find her voice.

"Perhaps, dear"—he was amazingly himself now—"perhaps this is best, after all. This way, we meet, at least, dear. We have found each other . . . we have found each other . . ."

"We have found each other forever, Harris." She was crying. It was all far, far beyond her control.

"I am glad," he murmured.

Slowly, as they had opened, his eyes closed. But he was breathing—quite as before.

Doctor Henderson was leaving.

Miss Nichols reappeared, and took the fan from Hilda's unresisting fingers.

Hilda got up after a moment, and groped her way to the hall.

The doctor was outside now, moving along the hall toward the stairs. The door was closing.

She opened it, and hurried after him. He turned.

"Oh, Doctor," she cried softly, through her tears—"he has talked to me! What does it mean? You must tell me what it means! Is he better?"

The physician took her arm, and moved her gently toward the door.

"I am coming back in an hour," he said. "We shall try the serum again to-night. We will do everything possible . . ."

She stopped short; leaned flat back against the wall, with arms spread stiffly out at her sides; stared at him.

"You mean—he is not better! . . ."

The physician inclined his head. "He is not better, Miss Wilson."

XXX

BY AN OPEN WINDOW AT NIGHT; LIFE IN ITS EBB AND FLOW; A LOCK OF HAIR; BLINK MAKES A TRIP TO FRANCE; AND HILDA, A LITTLE LATER, WRITES HOME

DOREYN did not speak again. For three days he lay in so profound a stupor that Hilda more than suspected the physicians of administering their drug in mercifully large quantities. Miss Nichols had as good as admitted that hope was gone. Even if, through some incredible reserve power of resistance to the poison that had now permeated his system, bringing new and vital complications of its own, he should pass this crisis and come to a slight rally, he would be confronted with a series of operations that would tax the strength of a strong young man! So much from Miss Nichols. And there was still more that remained unphrased for Hilda's ears, though it could be read in the distinct change of manner on the part of the medical men—a relaxation from strain, a quiet acceptance of the inevitable.

Hilda drew Miss Nichols into the front room, on the evening of this third day and questioned her closely. The nurse, seeing that she had to deal with a woman in perfect poise, answered with some frankness. And thus Hilda herself arrived at the conclusion that the more merciful course was the better. She could not bear to think of permitting

further suffering to that wasted, torture-racked body—futile suffering.

This was the twentieth of September. They all sat up during the night that followed. During the twenty-first Hilda did not leave the apartment. That night, all of it, she spent at his bedside, sending first one nurse and then the other to snatch a little sleep.

In the morning of the twenty-second, as there was little perceptible change, they fairly forced her to lie down on the couch in the front room. Here her healthy body, in sheer rebellion, sank into the sleep that came the moment her eyes closed. Doctor Henderson himself, seeing her there, stole in and drew down the blinds.

She awoke many hours later, in the twilight. Miss Nichols was moving her shoulder with a strong hand.

"Come, Miss Wilson," she was saying. "You had better come now."

And Hilda, for the first time in her life, entered a death chamber. They had sent her away during her father's last illness. She was then a child of five.

In her inexperience she underestimated the extent of the shock to herself. She knew that doctor and nurses were observing her closely. They suggested that she lie down. And she knew that the physician left a bromide with Miss Nichols. She even felt a momentary resentment. There was so much to be done, and she was glad that she had the strength to do it.

This was her first thought. Her second thought was so perplexing that she shut herself in her room, put out the light, drew a chair to the window, and forced herself to think it out.

The window overlooked an area way. She could see the windows of other houses, rear windows, most of them

lighted. Men and women were moving about here and there, in rooms behind the windows. She even heard voices, and a ripple of laughter from a girl's lips. Down in the area a man servant was whispering to a serving maid. She could see them by the light that poured out of an open doorway. He had his arm about her shoulders.

The tears came and fell on Hilda's cheeks. In her lap, close to the window-sill, her hands clasped, the fingers interlocked very tightly. She looked down at the softly whispering couple. She glanced from window to window. She raised her head and gazed at the strip of night sky above the chimney pots.

Before the night was out men would be coming, whispering obsequious men, to make the last earthly arrangements. In the morning others would come—others would have to come. There was a family in Chicago to be notified by cable. There might be difficulties of a curious and harmful kind—harmful to him, to the name he had borne so honorably and so long. The passing of Harris Doreyn could not be inconspicuous, not possibly. Even the American ambassador would have to know and at once.

More and more clearly she saw this. No matter what their relationship had been, his and hers, it was now her secret. The memory, the spirit of it, was in her heart, a part of her very self; but it must stay there, her own secret, locked away from the world that is so heedless and, at the last, so ruthless. Their relationship lay outside the primitive classifications of the world. It did not occur to her, at this time, to question the justice of these classifications. She merely felt, and felt intensely, that here was a fragile and beautiful secret, all her own, on which the world must never lay its crude destructive hands. And she felt that she would never again be hasty in applying those rough

worldly classifications to others. Without knowing that a very wise man had once found the precise phrase in which to crystallize her new perception of life, she was beginning to understand, for herself and out of her own deep experience, that to know all is to forgive all.

From the house across the area floated again a girl's light laugh. And Hilda leaned on the window-sill; pressed her handkerchief for a long time against her eyes; then looked up above the chimney pots at a little cluster of stars. . . . Life, all about her, was going on. Doubtless, her life, too, would go on. She did not know just how, but it would go on. Somehow, she would work out a new direction—possibly even drift back, on some terms or other, into the old. Just now all that was remote. Now she was thinking how this man who had loved her so had, for better or worse, made her life. Never fully realizing it she had modeled her business self on his. His maxims, memories of his early character and industry, had guided her at every turn. Now it would be very different. She would not be hard now. She would not drive in the old way. She fell to hoping that she would be a finer better woman for his love. It seemed to her that she might now hope so much. She was glad that she had his letter. That she would keep. It would be a good thing for her to read if, at some future time, she should find herself in danger of losing her way in life. It would live in her spirit; it would be a sort, a fine sort, of monument to his memory. . . .

After a time she went to her room, moved by a quiet resolution, and set to work packing her things.

Mr. Priest would be in early in the morning, she was sure. She had telegraphed his home the first thing. The address was in Doreyn's pocket notebook. Perhaps he

would come before morning. She hoped he would. It would be better.

He did come, shortly after midnight, knocking softly at the door.

Hilda herself, still fully dressed, let him in.

They sat in the front room and talked things out. When she told him that she was leaving in the morning he offered no objection. She saw that he instantly recognized the wisdom of her course. She went a step further, and pointed out to him, very simply, the importance of protecting Doreyn's worldly name. And he inclined his head in assent.

"There might be difficulties," he observed, a little later. "The confusion of the war, and of the crowds of refugees, will operate in our favor."

"Yes," said she. "I had thought of that. Every one is too preoccupied to think about anything else, even about—him."

"You will have to give me your address here," said the solicitor. "There will be those other matters to settle—the money—"

She sat very still, considering this.

"Perhaps I ought not to feel sorry about that," said she, musing.

"You will understand my position," he explained. "It can hardly go back to his estate now. I can not keep it, or use it. . . ."

"Yes," said she, "of course. I will think it over. We should find some good use to make of it."

When he rose to go she walked out with him into the hall. At the door she paused.

"Would you"—she hesitated—"would you like to see him?"

"Very much, Miss Wilson."

She led him into the silent room, and herself, with gentle but firm hands, turned back the sheet that covered the white still features. The face was like marble, immobile, calm. There was no evidence now of the suffering.

The solicitor stood for a long time at the opposite side of the bed. Finally she replaced the sheet.

She looked up at him. She had never thought of Mr. Priest as an old man; but now he did seem rather old. There was more gray in his hair than she had ever observed before. He had compressed his thin lips, and the action appeared to deepen the lines in the lower half of his face. She realized, as she studied him, that memories were stirring in his mind, and deep thoughts.

As she put out the light, and they turned reverently toward the door, Mr. Priest said:

"He was twelve years my client. It seems more than that—he left so deep an impression on all who were associated with him."

Hilda's thoughts darted back. Suddenly she remembered that first trip of his to England, and the tangle of business anxieties that had hung about it. She even visualized herself, the girl of barely twenty, in his office. How her young romantic spirit had idealized him then! How deeply she had felt him in her life!

Mr. Priest closed the door behind him, very softly, and tiptoed off down the hall.

Hilda stood motionless in the hall by the door.

That tiptoeing sound died away on the stairs. The apartment was utterly still. Miss Nichols had planned to sit up, despite Hilda's protest; but she must have dropped off to sleep in her chair.

Hilda was still thinking of those days when she had worked so hard and so loyally at his side. She felt again

the thrill of a love that had stolen into her young heart; half-recognized for what it was; at first vaguely, then admittedly wrong, yet of a bewildering beauty. She felt again the stabs of horror that had shocked her soul . . . the blind dark strugglings . . . the things her untrained mind had thought about herself . . . thoughts, thoughts, thoughts! . . . the cutting herself free, blindly, desperately . . . the difficult early days in New York, days of making her way alone, of little by little hardening her heart . . . then the years of her success, and a sort of hard oblivion of the spirit. And that strange evening on the New York-Chicago train, when he had kissed her.

She thought, too, of the curious difficult days of the preceding winter in Paris, and of how Blink and the baby had brought her back to life and to the one man who had loved her more than his work, more than his family, more than his life. She could not think of all this in conventional terms now, she could not think of it as right or wrong. She could see it, at last, only for what it was, one of the queer complex facts of life, one of the rather pitiful facts of life.

She was still standing there in the hall.

She had left his door open. She went now to close it. Her fingers closed slowly about the cold metal knob. She hesitated and lingered there. Then on a sudden impulse, she slipped into her own room, found her scissors, and came back to his bedside.

Very gently, by the faint light that came in through the window, she cut a lock of his hair.

She started to replace the covering, hesitated, leaned over and kissed his forehead. Then she covered the face

for the last time, sank to the floor beside the bed, and gave way to the sobs that came. She had never given up so completely.

And in the completeness of the experience, in the very poignancy of it, there was a very little relief.

She must have sat there for half an hour or longer before getting up and going to her own room. She found an envelope and sealed the lock of hair in it, then put it away in her wrist-bag.

She undressed, put on a negligee, and sat by the window until she heard Miss Nichols moving about. Then she went to bed.

Miss Nichols heard her, and brought a drink of the bromide solution. But Hilda would not touch it. She could not bear to think of sleeping.

Before eight-thirty in the morning she was gone, in a taxi, with her bags and her trunk. Back to the big hotel in the Strand she went, where the last of the refugees still swarmed, a little stunned by the swiftness of the terrible war that was devastating the continent with such amazing speed, but talking, always talking, of themselves and their small troubles, and greatly worried about their baggage.

She moved silently, swiftly, through the crowds in the lobby, a youngish, rather beautiful woman, very self-possessed, with a quietly sad face. She knew now why women choose to wear mourning. If she had dared permit herself a wish it would have been for that—for the defense it brings against intrusion. But it was not permitted to her.

Quickly she established herself in a room, a hotel room of the sort she so disliked, opened the big wardrobe trunk, and set out some of her own things on the bare bureau.

Then she went out again, by taxi, to the smaller hotel where the Morans were stopping. They were at breakfast, and brought her in with them.

She had to tell them what had taken place. It was odd how she accepted them, came to them, in this sad time. So sure was she of them, indeed, that it seemed hardly difficult. She knew they would not ask questions.

Even the announcement of the money he had left her—that was already hers, in fact, by outright gift of the living man—was not too hard. She had to tell them of this! for she had worked out a plan in the night. She stated it now.

"You see"—she looked from Blink to Adele, and back to Blink again—"I can't use this money for myself. Some of it can go to the Belgians, or into one of the English funds. But those things are not personal, exactly—not to me. I'm thinking of—" she hesitated. It *was* a little difficult now. There was a sudden lump in her throat.

Blink and Adele looked at each other.

"You mean Juliette," said he, very thoughtfully.

Hilda nodded.

"God knows what's happening to her. Though she must have some money left. Those girls are wonderful, you know. They can live like little mice."

"Here's where I want you two to advise—and help, perhaps," said Hilda. "Had we better bring her out of France, or leave her there?"

Blink thought this all over, very deliberately. Then he said, "I should say it all depends on how far you want to go, Hilda."

She threw out both hands. "Go through," she said; "take care of her."

"Of course, Hilda, if there wasn't a war she could work."

"But there *is* a war, Blink."

"That's right!" put in Adele.

"She might not be so happy here in England," mused Blink, "but—"

"She'd be happy anywhere on earth with the baby!" cried Adele softly. There was an odd touch of radiance in her eyes, that Hilda did not fail to note.

"—but it's safer than France right now."

"I think so," said Hilda.

"I'll tell you," Blink said, after one of his deliberate efforts at thinking, "if you'll look out for Adele, Hilda, I'll go over and find her and bring her back."

"Thank you, Blink," replied Hilda warmly; "that is just what I wanted you to say."

"The channel ports aren't real safe, are they?" asked Adele.

"I'll go around by Bordeaux," said Blink quietly. And thus it was settled.

Hilda went to Mr. Priest's office in the afternoon, explained the matter to him, and drew for the first time on the money that was so strangely her own. The next morning Blink left.

He was gone ten days, three of which he spent in Paris, hunting for some trace of the mother and child. Two days more were spent in persuading her, in allaying her fears, and in getting her out of the harassed capital and down to Bordeaux. Meantime Hilda made one more move, this time to the other hotel; and once more found herself living close to Adele.

But there had been deep changes in the life of each. Adele was now a contented young married woman, with sober dreams in her eyes. Hilda was quiet, thoughtful, with more than a hint of a quite new sort of resignation in her face. They could talk, but not freely.

Then Blink came with his charges, sobered anew by the later sorrows of the war. For a day or so Hilda found herself torn by the proximity of the baby that had been so close to her and that she had lost. It would not do—she could see that. And vague plans that had been growing and gradually relating themselves in her mind, now took definite form.

One day she informed Blink and Adele that she was going down into Devonshire for a rest of a few weeks before taking the ship for New York. She had made all arrangements with Blink and Mr. Priest for the care of Juliette and the baby. She had him come now to the hotel to meet them all. It was odd to see him there, the very formal Briton, balancing his cylindrical hat on his arm, listening stiffly to the tentative efforts of Blink and Adele at conversation. So, crusty but touched, he sipped his tea, bowed and stiffly went away.

Blink and Adele came to the station to see Hilda off. Adele cried softly. And Blink was silent.

The train rolled away, through pleasant hilly countrysides as yet untainted by the actuality of war, leaving the young married couple standing on the platform, in a momentary vacuum of the spirit—for a strong interesting personality had abruptly passed on out of their lives, a personality stronger and more interesting than they consciously knew. For them now there was only that odd sort of vacuum, and the silent ride back to the hotel, with an impersonal, ineffectual remark now and then.

Hilda found an inn at a fishing village on the north coast of Devon. The place suited her needs. She must be alone. She must think, must grope in the dark places of life to find herself. Here she could walk far over the moors, breathing in deep inhalations of the sea air, and

opening her mind, at the same time, to the thoughts that came. It seemed to her at these times that until very recently she had moved through life in a spirit of evasion, as one who hastens with averted face. It was different with her now. She had changed. She found now that she could look at life.

The only possessions of Doreyn's that she had permitted herself to take were certain of his books. In the evenings she read in these. And in the novels of the recent English writers, particularly—men in whom Doreyn had taken great interest—there was much of that sober realization of life that she herself was growing into. These books helped her to mount that final altitude of human experience—from which she could see something of the problems and the sufferings of others, could begin to understand, in the deeper sense of the word, that her own most perplexing, bitterest spiritual problems were in no sense peculiar to herself but were merely her individual share of the burden of life.

And standing, in her spirit, on this altitude, she began to perceive that the resentments and bitterness that had heretofore played a vital part in her day-by-day life were thinning and fading out, like mists that had obstructed her view. They would return, of course, unexpectedly, and assuming new forms in order to mislead her as to their ugly nature—her dawning, very sober sense of humor told her that. But they would at least find that they had to deal with a woman who was vitally different from the woman they had so blinded in the past. During parts of the time, at least, she would surely be able to hold to something of this new vision. And that would be a gain.

She read, too, in Doreyn's little Testament—propped up in bed, an old-fashioned lamp at her shoulder—taking it

at random, a chapter here, another there. But only as far as Paul. Never beyond that point at which Doreyn's fine spirit had been blocked. And if she found it a little difficult to perceive a complete application for the Christ philosophy in the hard drive of business life, as she knew it, at least she found there the sweetness that had grown so in him during his later years. She knew that he had found in it a completer application than any she could perceive. And knowing, as well, the bigness of the man, she was inclined to accept his point of view; thinking that, since she herself had already changed so much, she would very likely change more in this regard.

She knew now that she was going back to the store. Her first letter after she reached Devon was written to Joe Hemstead, telling him that she was fully herself and was ready to take up her work, and asking him to cable her if there should be anything for her to do on this side before taking the steamer. The result was a prompt message from J. H. congratulating her on her recovery and suggesting a few matters that might be attended to in London.

A day or so later further messages came from Ed Johnson and May Isbell. May's few words she looked at for several moments with a slight bridling of resentment; but then recovered, and tossed the paper aside with a shrug. After all, personal thought of this sort was sheer waste. The only real question was whether May was competent to do her work. The cablegram, with its implication of a sudden change of front, suggested that perhaps she was not—and that, after all, was the only possible conclusion regarding her activities as a gossip, her evident smallness and jealous ambition and lack of self-control. But the thing to do was to give her a new chance. It was

possible that Hilda herself, she reflected now, might have been partly responsible for May's failure to grow.

Then Hilda thought about the return to the store. In a hundred shifting mental pictures she saw herself walking in, on the first day. She wondered whether it would be very difficult. It might not prove so, as she felt nowadays. Certainly she did not find herself afraid of the hostility she would surely have to face.

There was a little heap of recent letters from her mother lying unanswered in the top drawer of her trunk. More and more definitely her thoughts turned to those letters now. One day she got them out and read them all through. During the uncertainties preceding Doreyn's death it had been so far from possible to make any plans that she had been unable to write at all. If she had since then fallen back on the delays of war-time communications as a tacit explanation of her silence, she felt only a partial guilt. Deeply as she had been coming to understand and feel the sorrows in her mother's life, she could not have written. Life was too much for her just then. And so she had been impelled to put that letter off from day to day, waiting until she could feel that the time had come when she could write it in the spirit in which it must be written.

Finally, on a still evening, she settled herself in her room to write it.

For a long time she sat quietly, her portfolio in her lap, gazing, chin on hand, into the fire. In a sober sort of way she was glad that this moment had come at last, and that she could say to her mother the things she had been coming to feel of late. There had been a mellowing. She had lived deeply, but she was not suffering as women suffer who are forced by the loss of a husband to change abruptly from the set habits of a lifetime. The only real habits she had

were working habits. These had not been snatched away from her. She was going back to them, indeed. The change in her was of another nature. Until this year, she had been, with all her great nervous intensity, struggling with life, really at war with herself. That was what had beaten her down. It had begun more than fourteen years earlier when the first flutterings of love for Harris Doreyn had stirred in her heart. Now, after the years, that experience had reached a sort of completion. It was not a fruition—but it was a completion. And sad as it was, it carried with it a sense of release from strain.

"Mother dear," she began, "I haven't been able to write you before. There have been very real reasons. I can't very well write them all out, even in the rather long letter that, I can see, this one is going to be. But before long now I shall be back at work, and soon after that it will be time for Margie's wedding, and I will be with you to help in the last preparations and to share all the excitement with you and her, and then, after that, we are going to pack up and come east—yes, you too!—and find a little home somewhere near New York where we can make ourselves comfortable against the years to come. And then, when we are settled and beginning to live our home life, you and I, I am going to tell you the whole story of this strange year.

"It *has* been a strange year, mother. No question of that. I have been shaken—and changed. But I am not the worse for it. When you see me and we can talk things all out, I think you will feel as I do about that. Of course, as you have surmised—I haven't missed that touch of anxiety in your letters—there have been experiences. Very deep experiences. There is now a sorrow in my heart that is not made easier by the fact that I can not share it with a single human being—until I see you. You are the only person I have left now, and I can see that I am not going to be secretive with you any more. It isn't that I ever

meant to be that, but a girl is likely to be bewildered by the experiences that come to her when she is thrown out into the world to make her way. I'm not altogether sure that she doesn't *have* to be secretive—at least until she grows up, and learns a little of the struggles others have to go through with and—well, I rather imagine that phrase 'until she grows up' covers it.

"Anyway, I am finding a very deep comfort now in the thought that we shall soon be together, and that I can bring my troubles to you—even though in one sense they are troubles no longer, but just the deep, deep memories with which I shall be living for the rest of my life. That much I know. Nothing will ever efface these memories. There are too many years back of them, and the climax of it all has come at too mature a time in my life. That is why I shall not marry. You used to worry a good deal about that, mother, and wonder why I didn't. Well, now I know that it can not happen. There was but one man, in the last analysis, that I could have married. I have been stirred, and torn. I have even wavered. But there was really only one. And him I shall never see again on this earth. So after this, at last without the secretiveness and the rather dreadful restlessness that has, at one time and another, played havoc with my life, I'm going to be just a little bit kinder and friendlier with my not-at-all old mother than she is accustomed to finding me. Yes, I am.

"And do you know, it is occurring to me that there is a lot ahead of us two. You see, we're going to take hold of life on a new basis. I've been a rather destructive person —charging ahead, looking out only for myself. Now we're going to be constructive, you and I. We'll build up together—a home and fresh interests. One thing occurs to me, you are right now a good deal in the condition I was in eight months ago, what in the store we call being stale. You are just that, a little stale, living on there all these years in the old town, meeting the same mean little problems over and over every day, three hundred and sixty-five times a year. On the whole, I'm inclined to think that you'll do better to have a little New York life before you

settle down again. We'll just take our time about that. First we'll stop somewhere in town. Surely there will be a good deal of shopping for you to do. I'll help with that, of course. And then there will be places and things you ought to see.

"As for Margie, let's give her a fine Godspeed! I think I shall give her a little money. Heaven knows they can use it, those two! And let's do all we can to brace John up and make him feel that we stand solidly behind the match. That will be the best thing we can do for them, surely. Yes, I still have that piece of green silk in my trunk, and will bring it along in time to have it made up. You see, I shall be in New York within a week or ten days after this letter reaches you, so there is time enough."

It occurred to her here that her mother would be worrying in regard to the ocean crossing; and so she wrote at some length about this, explaining that the English navy held complete command of the North Atlantic and that passenger ships were moving back and forth almost as regularly as if there were no war.

From this she went on to speak of London in war-time—of the evidences of military preparation, the movement of the tourist refugees, and the contradictory rumors flying here and there. In conclusion, she told of this quaint old tavern in its quiet village on the north coast of Devon.

"It is night-time now, mother, and I am sitting in my room on the second floor. It is rather damp and raw outside, but in here, by my funny, narrow little fireplace with its glowing coals, it is snug and warm. The bed is at least two hundred years old, a four-poster, mahogany, of course, and perfectly enormous. It is the widest bed I ever saw in my life. The posts support a regular roof, and there are heavy curtains—very old stuff. The mantel, the table, and even the walls are covered with Victorian bric-à-brac. Over the mantel is a steel engraving of the *Stag at Eve*. And

while the room is scrupulously clean, it all smells old—you know—just because it *is* old.

"During the nearly two weeks I have been here I have come to love the place. It has seemed to be what I needed, perhaps because, more than anything else, it suggests peace. And peace, some kind of peace, is the only thing in the world I crave now, mother mine. I have been sadly storm-tossed. I've been racked and wrung with it. Now I want peace. And from now on, you and I together are to find as much of it as, God helping us, we can."

So she ended her letter.

XXXI

IN WHICH HILDA OPENS A DOOR ON FATE

IT was a morning in early November—a bright crisp morning. The great plate-glass windows of the Hartman store blazed with rich autumn tints displayed against backgrounds of Circassian walnut. Women, out for an early choice of bargains, moved from window to window, thoughtfully studying the thousand and one articles of wear and furnishing set out before their eyes with enticing skill.

A few feet from them, along the wide sidewalk, flowed the opposing streams of pedestrians that would increase to torrents at noon and early afternoon and that would not slacken until night had fallen on the great city and diverted them to those other and more brightly lighted streets of the theater and restaurant district.

Hilda Wilson, walking briskly over from the subway station, paused at the corner and looked. It was nearly a year since she had seen it. She was conscious of a momentary sense of vague surprise that it should all be going on just as she had left it so long ago. The women were smarter than ever, with their furs, their dogs, their rather bizarre skirts of the late 1914 mode. Already the avenue was crowded with motors, buses and business traffic.

At the curb, in front of the main entrance to the Hart-

man store, stood the erect, liveried carriage man—the same man, she thought at first, as had stood there every day, rain or shine, for years; but on second glance she saw that it was a new man, who stood, or moved, or opened limousine doors precisely as his predecessor had always done. That other man had had a snub nose and round chin, she recalled; the present one had a straight nose and square chin. . . . So the great machine that was the store ran always smoothly on. Not a human there but was one of three thousand replaceable units. No one was essential, not even Mr. Hartman, not even J. H. himself, who had always seemed the real driving power to those under his direct command. Old faces might disappear, new faces might come; the store would be the same.

So thought Hilda, as she made her way across the sidewalk to glance in at the nearest show window. For her thoughts had been vagrant indeed as she was riding downtown in the close crowded subway, and, later, walking over toward the store. Her nerves were strung surprisingly high. She was not conscious of anything like fear, or even hesitation, as she approached the building where her name had been made, and then, in a sense, lost. It was simply that her nerves were playing perverse little tricks on her mind. . . . She had been dwelling, at moments, on the plan, now settled, for bringing her mother east and making a home for her. That plan had been conceived in a glow of warm emotions. Since then, during many long hours of pondering, she had come to think of it for the task, the job, it was certainly going to be. There would be difficulties, little rubs. But she saw, too, that it would be a fine sort of job. It would put her to the test in a thousand ways. The thing to do, she thought now, was to foresee as many as possible of the little difficulties that

would be certain to arise, and never permit them to surprise her. And she was inclined to believe that she could manage to be kind.

She moved along toward the entrance, thoughtfully studying each window display as she passed. Everything looked all right, or very nearly all right. Her practised eye detected a slight something missing here and there, a lack of quality in the lines of the gowns and frocks that had been fitted to the waxen manikins. Yes, they had the domestic air, most of them. The curious French genius for color was missing, in particular. And yet, everything considered, they were surprisingly good. And she reflected, as she moved in through the wide double doors, on the baffling problems that J. H. and his staff had had to solve in meeting the autumn demand with nearly the entire European supply cut off overnight.

She found herself within the portals, and on the instant the smooth atmosphere of the great, almost silent machine descended on her and enveloped her spirit, just as it was designed to envelop the spirit of every vagrant shopper that might set foot over the threshold. The indirect lighting, spreading softly from the creamy white ceiling, was soothing to eyes and nerves. The ten long aisles, set off behind glass and mahogany counters and six-foot stock cabinets, were all quietly ablaze with the color of ribbons, scarfs, hosiery and a thousand dainty articles of wear and adornment, with the sparkle of jewelry, with the impressive appeal, farther to the rear, of a quarter-acre of books piled in symmetrical heaps upon dozens of wide tables. Off to the right, where they had always been, were the huge piles of trunks and bags, with a front display of glittering, silver-mounted travel articles. In the corner, on the left, was the men's furnishing department, where special sales

were prepared on the aisle tables. Behind all the counters stood or moved quietly the neatly dressed sales girls, each trained under the rigid but not inhuman system of Joe Hemstead, each ready on the instant to smile and speak if a prospective customer should so much as pause. All of this was the more evident to the eye as the crowds that, later in the morning, would swarm and jostle in every one of these wide aisles was at present but a thin promise of what was to come.

And above all this, one vast story on another, similar scenes, she knew, would open to her eyes as the elevator carried her up to that scene of her own battles and growth, the fifth floor. She thought of her own little office, in the corner behind the high stock cabinets where the women's suits were hung on the sliding frames. May Isbell had, of course, been using her office. But May would be out now. Perhaps there would be flowers. Always, in the past, when she had returned from Paris, there had been flowers, at least from the girls in her own department. She wondered how it would be to-day.

She met Mr. Andrews, of the jewelry department. He stopped, looked distinctly embarrassed, even flushed a little, and then, as if on second thought, extended his hand.

And Hilda, as she took it, felt her heart sinking. Here was her first encounter in the store, and it was not encouraging. Even Andrews, down here on the main floor, had heard the stories. She could see it. . . . She knew now that this meeting was but the first skirmish in what was destined to be a long series of battles—and, worse, of secret attacks, of the subtle work of hostile sappers and miners, that she would never be able to find and meet squarely.

They spoke of her absence, of the war, and of the new

merchandising problems; then she moved on toward the elevator.

She wondered how it would be up-stairs. J. H. had dropped never a hint. But then, he was not given to dropping hints. He assumed energy, soundness, growth, always. Nothing else interested him very much. He had simply welcomed her back, by cable and letter. That was all, so far. Later on, at some time in this day, she would be expected to go up to his office and have her little talk with him. It would be outwardly, a most casual meeting, dashed with friendliness. But she would be on trial. She knew it. His quiet, rather cold eyes would take her in, completely. His orderly mind would receive certain impressions of her, weigh them and carefully file them away. There would be not the slightest use in any efforts at making a showing. Those eyes would strip the self-conscious front away and see her, quite simply, for whatever she might be. . . . But he would be just. Never in her busy life had she known a juster man. No gossip could touch or sway him. On the other hand, not the slightest evidence either of growth or of deterioration could escape him.

There was a steadying sort of comfort in this thought, a half-formulated but instinctive feeling that of real justice she had no fear. She had nothing whatever to hide from eyes that could see reality. Her fight lay with unreality, with hypocrisy, with the shallow, bitter little souls that muddle ambition, jealousy, suspicion and evil-mindedness together and call the result morality.

And dwelling swiftly, a little vaguely, but very deeply, on these thoughts and emotions, she found herself settling on something solid. She knew that she was ready to meet

the world—quietly ready, even sadly—and without defiance, without bitterness. She was thinking of Doreyn, how he had lived, suffered and died—a puzzled man, a tortured man, in certain respects what the world calls wrong, yet sweet and sound to the last. She thought, too, of Blink, and of the finely simple, natural way in which his strong unimaginative spirit met life just as it might happen to come. Yes, she owed Blink something, too. She even thought of his big fight—how he had faced that. It had been perplexingly rough, that fight, but it had carried lessons of a sort. After all, what was life but just a fight! What was moral strength but the spiritual muscle one developed in the struggle! What was faith but a stored-up memory of past victories! . . . She was ready!

It came to her, suddenly, as the elevator door closed softly behind her and the car moved on toward the several stories above, as she found herself facing the spacious fifth floor, her own floor, and bowing pleasantly to two girls that passed—it came to her then that she was a fortunate woman to have known big men. Blink was big, in his way. Doreyn was big. And another big man was by now up-stairs, in a mahogany-paneled office on the eighth floor. J. H. would never play a personal part in her life, of course; yet she owed him a great deal too. "Yes," she thought, "it has been a privilege—to know big men."

Then she found herself facing a little rush of people—women, girls and a few men. Mr. Hedges, of the shoe department, happened to be there, and greeted her pleasantly enough. The rush was quiet, and was over in a moment, for the first morning customers were moving about the floor.

May Isbell did not appear until a little later. She man-

aged a rather timid cordiality, and was unmistakably relieved by Hilda's sober friendliness of manner. She had moved all her things out of Hilda's room, she said.

Then Hilda found herself in that room. It was really little more than a cubby-hole. Two of its walls were the backs of the stock cabinets. But it was now a gay little place, for the narrow flat-top desk was covered with flowers.

She put aside her gloves, coat and hat, and dropped into the chair before the desk. She could see the corners of cards projecting here and there from the several open bouquets that lay on the two large boxes.

The big bunch of crimson carnations was from the sales girls. The other smaller bouquets were from individuals in the department—all bearing the curious suggestion of peace-offerings. She opened the two boxes. May Isbell's card lay on the violets. The other was a long box, obviously containing American beauties. When she opened it, she was surprised and pleased to find a penciled note from Ed Johnson.

"Good luck, Hilda!" he wrote. "You'll win! Don't forget I'm with you. And J. H. is solid. And you'll find there's a good many more that are for you, like he and I."

She sat very still for a moment, studying this note, and turning it over and over. Then she tore it slowly into small bits, and dropped them into the waste paper basket.

The flowers she set at the back of her desk and on both sides. She had one old glass vase here in the room somewhere. At least, there used to be one. And two or three of the other women had vases that she could borrow. She decided to attend to this a little later, after she had communicated with Joe Hemstead.

She called him up now. He was in a conference, it ap-

peared; but Miss Pemberton, his secretary, looked over his engagements and said that she could see him at twenty minutes past eleven.

She thought over this coming talk, in the intervals of chatting with the many who dropped in to see her. One thing she had determined upon during the last fortnight of steady thinking—she was going to tell J. H. her story, about Blink and the baby, and particularly about Doreyn. He had heard the gossip; she would give him the truth. Probably there would not be time to do this to-day, but she would certainly let him know that she wished to talk it out with him. And then, perhaps later on in the week, he would set aside a little real time for her. She knew that he would do that.

Her watch ticked around to eleven-fifteen. It was time to go; for one naturally anticipated by a minute or two an appointment with J. H.

She pushed her chair back, and rose. Then she saw that a single flower, a large chrysanthemum, had fallen to the floor on the inner side of the desk, beneath the window. She picked it up. Pinned to it was a small envelope, sealed as Ed's had been.

She opened it. Within was a card of a sort that Hilda had not seen since she was a child—a hand-written card, with Spencerian shadings and hair-line flourishes, folded within a soft pasteboard cover, like a photograph. The name was, "Miss Annie M. Haggerty."

Hilda stared at it, and pursed her lips. Then she laid the chrysanthemum with the other flowers, dropped the card into the top drawer of the desk, and hurried over to the elevators.

Miss Pemberton, seated outside the mahogany door, greeted her pleasantly. It occurred to Hilda that the girl

had grown a little older during the year. Her face, in repose, was distinctly sadder than it had been. Life had been moving on, then, with others as well as with herself. She recalled an old remark of Ed's, "There is a story behind every face in the store."

This was a truism, of course. She had made similar remarks herself, when talking to outsiders of the vast human drama that goes on unceasingly within the four walls of a big department store. But in those days she had taken the thought rather lightly, and always impersonally. It had meant little more to her than a picturesque fact. Now she found herself wondering what could be the story behind Miss Pemberton's face. And for the first time it occurred to her that there was a story behind her own face, that she herself, Hilda Wilson, after all, was not a person of peculiar intense importance in this world, but just a rather well-trained woman who worked in a store—"successful," to be sure, a department head, with a good salary and a liberal expense account—who was in no essential different from other women in stores, and who, just like the others, bore hints in her face of the human story that lay behind the mask.

A buzzer sounded. Miss Pemberton smiled and nodded.

Hilda opened the door, and stepped forward to meet what was to be as surely and definitely her fate as if it had been the noisy climax of a great swirling drama of character and destiny instead of a quiet meeting between a woman who was very well gowned and was still reasonably young and more than reasonably good-looking, and a man of little more than forty who wore excellent clothes and a close-clipped mustache and looked steadily at you through nose-glasses out of large gray eyes.

Mr. Hemstead rose, and met her with a solid grip of the hand; then nodded toward a chair.

As she seated herself, her eyes swiftly took in familiar details about the room. The wide flat desk, with its glass top, had nothing whatever on it excepting two small heaps of correspondence, each in neat alignment and held down by a paper weight, an inkwell with pen and pencil, and a desk clock. Absolutely nothing else; just a six-foot-by-four surface of plate glass on mahogany. And the long table at his back was equally clear, bearing only a proof sheet of the day's general advertisement. She had never in her life known a man who could accomplish so much work in a day with so little outward evidence of it. His office had always looked like this. She found a sudden stimulus in the thought that it always would look like this. And it occurred to her that she must straighten out her own little cubby-hole before lunch. She would pick up those extra vases on her way down-stairs.

"I'm glad to see you back," he said, speaking impersonally, but with that familiar direct look.

"On the whole," she replied, gravely, "I'm glad to be here. From the little signs here and there I take it there is plenty of work to be done."

"Plenty. Though it isn't so bad now. We have had to tackle a lot of brand-new problems. . . . Tell me—did you have any difficulties in the war zone?"

She shook her head. Then, quite unexpectedly, her eyes filled with tears, and she had to turn her head and stare out the window for a moment.

But she was not ashamed of the tears. She faced him.

"You probably see that I'm not on the ailing list any more," she began.

"I never saw you look so well," said he, deliberately.

"I never in my life have been so well. It wasn't just my health that was the trouble."

"I know it," said he, quietly studying her.

"It was restlessness, and other things. There was a problem in my life that hadn't worked out. I can see that now. It had to work out."

"Well—I judge that something of that sort has happened."

"Yes. It has worked out. I'm ready to go on now and try to make a good job of it. But first"—she leaned forward on the table; she was not aware of the directness and determination in her eyes, nor of the steadiness with which they were fixed on him—"first, I wonder if you would let me tell you the whole story—I mean of what has happened to me this year."

"It isn't necessary," said he. "It is plain enough that you haven't been going backward."

"No, I haven't gone backward."

"Whatever has happened, you are a bigger woman for it. Of course, you know that yourself."

"Yes, I think so. At least, I hope so. But I know something of the talk that has been going on—"

He brushed this aside with an impatient gesture.

"—and I shall feel more comfortable, settling down to work, if you know the truth."

"All right," he said then. "I'll look over my engagements, and make an appointment with you. It will probably be sometime late this week or early next. For that matter, you'll have your hands full this week."

"Thank you," she replied; and rose. "Is Mrs. Hemstead well?"

"Fine, thanks."

"And the boys?"

"Great. They're off on their first camping trip." And drawing a letter from his pocket he shook out a few snapshots.

"They're growing up," said she, studying the photographs.

"Yes, they're growing up. Like the rest of us."

A moment more, and she was gone, walking out past Miss Pemberton and the two young men within the outer railing, conscious of a quiet sense of complete victory. He had said it, with his usual directness and completeness— She had not "gone backward." And it was true.

But the victory, oddly, brought no elation. Never in her life had he met her so frankly as an equal. And of course it was the first sight of her, as she was, that had made him meet her in this spirit. You always got from J. H. just about what you deserved, and, in the vernacular, you got it quick. Yet, she felt sobered, and more than a little humble.

She walked slowly past the long row of offices, rounded the corner of the partition, and found herself flatly confronting Stanley Aitcheson, who was rushing along with a bundle of proofs in his hand.

He stood stock-still, and stared at her. Then, very slowly, the rich color surged upward from the region of his collar, spread over cheeks, temple and forehead, clear up into the roots of his hair.

She extended her hand. He took it.

"When—when did you get back?" he said.

"Last night. How are you, Stanley?"

"Oh—very well. How are you?" His eyes were taking her in. He was puzzled, as well as surprised.

"I'm first-rate. They tell me you're to be congratulated."

"Why—why—yes, I am."

"Well, Stanley, I do congratulate you. You know I had a glimpse of Miss Macy, just a glimpse, at the Café de la Paix—the day we had tea there."

"That's right," said he. "That's right—you did!"

"And I liked her looks—and her mother's. I hope you will be happy. Now that I have at last come to see that there can be no marriage in my own life, I seem to want it all the more for my friends."

"Oh, come!" said he. "Oh, come, come! You'll find the fellow one of these fine days!"

"No, Stanley."

She smiled, rather sadly, and slowly shook her head. With a word or two more, she left him.

She was hoping strongly to get her work started, but found it impossible. People kept dropping in to see her. And the telephone kept ringing. She recalled, by mid-afternoon, that it never had been possible to do any real work on the first day after returning from abroad.

At four o'clock she met J. H. out by the elevators. He paused, as if his particular memories of this floor had been stirred by his own presence here and by the sudden sight of her.

"By the way," he said, "there is a girl in your department that we have had to talk over several times. Her name is Annie Haggerty. I believe you regarded her a demoralizing influence. I asked Martin to keep her on until you came back. If you don't want to keep her—"

"I do want to keep her," said Hilda, with a trace of inner warmth in her voice.

"All right," said he. "Just tell Martin." And he walked on.

After this until after half past five Hilda sat in her

office, dictating replies to the letters of greeting that had been coming in and chatting with Ed Johnson.

Then, finally, the last letter written and the last words said, she got up and walked out for the first close scrutiny of her department. The flocks of customers had thinned out now, and it was a good time to walk from one side of the floor to the other, noting the arrangement and display of the merchandise, and superficially studying the stock. In the morning, then, she would be better prepared to start in earnest at her job.

She wished it was morning now. She rather dreaded the evening and the night. She could not quite overcome the feeling of strangeness, a sort of bewilderment of the spirit, that had been stirring within her all day, even when, she knew, she was appearing most calm to the persons about her. Ed, indeed, had gazed at her in frank wonderment.

"I don't know what you've done to yourself, Hilda," he had confided, in her office, first glancing around for possible eavesdroppers, "but between you and I you look just great! I never saw you so fit!"

She had only smiled at this—rather sadly, just as she had smiled at Stanley.

Now she walked slowly through the wide aisle nearest the front windows, between the high cabinets that were full of women's suits. She planned to take each aisle in turn, walking back and forth across the building until she should have covered them all.

She felt some one plucking at her elbow, and turned.

A tired-looking woman stood there, convoying an awkward girl of what is known in England as the flapper age.

"Tell me," said the woman sharply, "where are the misses' waists?"

Hilda hesitated only a fraction of a second. She knew

well enough where the "misses' waists" had always been kept, and from the appearance of so much of the present arrangement of the department as she had observed she thought they must still be there. Anyway, it was part of the discipline of the store that all questions must be answered instantly as well as with courtesy.

She took a chance.

"Three aisles to the left—rear of the store," she said.

The woman moved off in the direction indicated, dragging the flapper after her.

Hilda turned back to her slow walk. It was odd, perhaps, but this one small episode, or her own instinctive part in it, gave her her first sense of belonging in the store. It was as if the old harness had all at once begun to settle about her shoulders, and as if the thorough training and the deep-seated habits developed through those fourteen years of driving work were at the same moment rousing her to pull and tug at the old load.

And working up through the sorrow that was now and was always to be a deep note in the harmony of her life, she became conscious of a sort of relief.

THE END